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PUBLISHED
THREE TIMES A MONTH

Adventure

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OF TEXAS
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The Devil Ship

TRAGIC END OF PLEASURE CRUISE
Captain, Guest and Stewardess Horribly Murdered. Owner and Mate Held
Ghostly Apparitions seen by Crew. Vague white figure flits about deck and attacks imprisoned Mate. "Ella" called "Devil-Ship" of Turner Line

A yacht far out at sea—manned by a picked crew. A guest, the Captain and a stewardess murdered in the night, and not a clew! Suspicion pointing to everyone—the drunken owner, the surly mate, even beautiful Elsa Lee. One man alone had the courage, and he—

But read the story for yourself. Theodore Roosevelt called it the greatest detective story ever written. It is but one of the many fascinating tales you get in your set of

MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

"The Woman Roosevelt"

"I am just a regular person with a home and a husband and three grown sons—" and in the Great War she and her three sons and her husband were all in the thick of it.

No wonder she was entertained by Kings and Presidents!

Sane common sense rules this woman. Her almost incredible bubbling humor keeps her modest, though wherever she goes she is acclaimed. She is a friend of great statesmen, of cowboys and soldiers, of secret service men, of the world's great writers, and of all women all over the world.

A mother first—a rider, a golfer, a swimmer — she and her three tall sons and her husband rode sometimes for 40 days in the wildest Rockies.

Roosevelt was her close friend.

And yet this woman, famed throughout the world, says: "I would rather write for the hearthside than for the classical shelves of a library. I would rather be in the hearts of the multitude than in the high places where the mighty sit alone."

Do you enjoy detective stories? No one alive—and few who are dead—ever wrote such thrilling, such baffling, such exasperating mysteries as Mary Roberts Rinehart.

Do you like love stories? Mary Roberts Rinehart knows how to write them. All the lure, all the absurdities, all the charm, of love are in her books.

Do you love youth? Do you like to be with young people? Nobody in the world could ever see into the heart of a girl or boy just growing up as can Mary Roberts Rinehart.

Infinite in her variety.

Send the coupon. Try to solve the mysteries; laugh with Bab; laugh at Tish; thrill with her lovers.

Get all in this one set—these tales for which magazines paid as high as $25,000, for which movie audiences sit entranced all over the world, which have made great fortunes on the stage in New York.

Truly has it been said that she has dipped her pen in magic—truly has it been said that she is the most popular woman in America!

Why We Can Make a Pre-War Price

Mary Roberts Rinehart makes big sums from her writing; she spends them just as freely. In order to make this first collected edition of her best works go—in order to enable us to make you a real "before-the-war" price on these wonderful volumes—she has agreed to accept exactly one-tenth of her usual rate of royalty.

Paper costs have come down—binding and labor costs are lower—but the real reason for the low price we are making on these books is Mrs. Rinehart's generosity in sacrificing her own royalties.

And that isn't all. To start the sale with a rush—to make you order *now* rather than wait for some special occasion like Christmas or a birthday—we will give you, for a short time only—

Adv. 10-30-21

Conan Doyle—FREE

All the latest Sherlock Holmes stories—his greatest, best mystery tales are in these 3 volumes. Think of it—the best works of two of the highest paid writers that ever lived—12 volumes of Mary Roberts Rinehart, for just one of which a great magazine paid $25,000—and 3 volumes of Conan Doyle—all yours for just about half what they would cost you in any book store. And you can pay for them, if you like, at the rate of only 35c a week.

Now, while you can, get your set of Rinehart at the low price—with the 3 volumes of Doyle FREE.

This is your chance.

Send the coupon now, without money, and the 15 volumes will go to you promptly, all charges prepaid. If they are not the best stories you ever read—if you don't read them and reread them—send them back at our expense. If you are not proud to have them on your library shelves, send them back

But mail the coupon today. This may be your only chance to get Conan Doyle's best Sherlock Holmes stories FREE. Don't miss it.

REVIEW OF REVIEWS CO.
30 Irving Place
New York

Send me on approval, charges paid by you, the 12 volumes of Mary Roberts Rinehart's best stories. Also the 3-volume set of Conan Doyle's latest stories. If I keep the books, I will send you $1.50 in 5 days, and then $1.50 a month for 10 months for the Rinehart set only and keep the 3 volumes of Doyle FREE. Otherwise I will, within 10 days, return both sets at your expense.

NAME .....

ADDRESS .....

OCCUPATION .....

Review of Reviews Co., 30 Irving Place, New York

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This Letter Saved Me 36%

on a New Typewriter

Chicago, Nov. 2, 1920.

Dear Henry:

I hear that you are down in New York to open a branch office for your firm. You'll be buying a lot of things for the office, not the least important of which will be typewriters.

And that's what I want to talk to you about—typewriters. I want to give you the benefit of an experience I had some time ago, and thereby, I hope, save you some real money.

About a year ago I decided to buy a typewriter for home use. My first thought was to purchase one of the makes we were using in the office, which had been put in before I became buyer for the house. But when it came to digging up a hundred dollars for the machine—I just couldn't. Somehow or other it looked like too much money to me.

Was $100

Before the War

Then I thought about picking up a second-hand machine, but the price was about as high, and I had no assurance of service.

I was undecided as to what to do, when one evening at home I ran across an Oliver Typewriter ad in a magazine. I remembered then having read the advertising before and being impressed with the story.

Now $64

"Why pay $100 for Any Typewriter"—
"When You Can Buy a New Oliver for $64?"

I read the ad—then it went on to explain how The Oliver Typewriter Company had cut the price by selling direct and eliminating costly selling methods. It was clear to me as an experienced buyer how they could well afford to lop off $36 of the $100 by their new economical selling plan.

The ad brought out the fact, too, that I didn't have to pay the $64 in a lump sum. I could settle at the easy rate of $4 a month. Naturally that appealed to me, for it was as easy as rental terms.

But the thing that decided me was their free trial offer. Without my sending or depositing a penny, they would ship me an Oliver for five days free trial. I could use the typewriter for five days just as if it were my own, and if I wasn't satisfied, all I had to do was to ship it back at the Oliver Company's expense. Well, I mailed in the coupon and got an Oliver for free trial. To make a short story shorter, I was more than pleased with the Oliver. I fully agreed with The Oliver Typewriter Company that if any typewriter was worth $100 it was this splendid Oliver.

Well, later when we found it necessary to replace some of the typewriters at the office, you may be sure I put in Olivers, saving the company a nice $36 on each. At first the girls were reluctant about changing machines, but after a week or two with the Oliver, they wouldn't have any other.

Naturally now we are all Oliver enthusiasts—that's why I write this letter to you.

You just give the Oliver a trial and you'll be more than willing to buy me a good dinner when I arrive in New York next month. Yours, J. B.

That is the letter that saved me $36 on each of my typewriters. I not only equipped the office with the Oliver, but, like my friend, I also bought one for home use. Yes, I am more than willing to buy my friend a good dinner for his valuable advice.

Any reader may order an Oliver direct from this ad by mailing the coupon. No money in advance. No deposit. No obligation to buy. Return or keep the Oliver as you decide after five days free trial. If you decide to keep the typewriter, you may take a year and a half to pay at the easy rate of $4 a month. Mail the coupon today—NOW.

Canadian Price, $82

The OLIVER Typewriter Company

737 Oliver Typewriter Bldg.
Chicago, Ill.

Save $36

A Finer Typewriter at a Fair Price
Over 900,000 Sold

THE OLIVER TYPEWRITER CO.
737 Oliver Typewriter Bldg., Chicago, Ill.

☐ Ship me a new Oliver Nine for five days free inspection. If I keep it, I will pay $64 at the rate of $4 per month. The title to remain in you until fully paid for.

My shipping point is.....
This does not place me under any obligation to buy. If I choose to return the Oliver, I will ship it back at your expense at the end of five days.

☐ Do not send a machine until I order it. Mail me your book—"The High Cost of Typewriters—The Reason and the Remedy," your de luxe catalog and further information.

Name.....
Street Address.....
City..... *State*.....
Occupation or Business.....

580.03

ADVENTURE
October 30th, 1921

Published three times a month by The Ridgway Company at Spring and Macdougal Sts., New York City. Yearly subscription $6.00 in advance; single copy 25 cents. Entered as second-class matter Oct. 1, 1910, at the post-office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879.

Volume 31
Number 3

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A $1000 Raise

"—Williams is making $1000 a year more than you are, but he is leaving the first of the month.

"You may not know it, Carter, but I've had my eye on you for some time—in fact, ever since I found out that you were using your spare time to read up on our business. That study has paid you, and us too, mighty well.

"Judging from the way you made good in your other positions I am convinced that you have the training and the ability to do Williams' work. Therefore, beginning with the first of the month you will be promoted to Williams' place at a $1000 a year more than you are now getting."

You Want a $1000 Raise Yourself

and a position of which you can be proud. Our PROMOTION PLAN will help you get it. Carter's case is only typical of thousands of others who got big money and real jobs through our PROMOTION PLAN. It will work just as happily for you.

If you were to look through our files, you would find case after case of big success. Men and women with no more and probably less ability than you have are making good with astonishing progress. There is no reason why you should lose out in getting more money and substantial promotion. Luck or pull won't give it to you but—the PROMOTION PLAN will.

DON'T TURN THIS PAGE until you have made up your mind to find out HOW TO GET A $1000 RAISE. Put a mark on the coupon against the line of work in which you are interested and we will send you full information on our practical PROMOTION PLAN. Mark and mail the coupon today.

AMERICAN SCHOOL
Dept. G74 **Drexel Avenue & 58th Street, Chicago, U.S.A.**

AMERICAN SCHOOL
Dept. G74 Drexel Ave. and 58th St., Chicago

Send me full information on how the PROMOTION PLAN will help me win promotion in the job checked.

.....Architect	.....Lawyer
.....Building Contractor	.....Machine Shop Practice
.....Automobile Engineer	.....Photoplay Writer
.....Automobile Repairman	.....Mechanical Engineer
.....Civil Engineer	.....Shop Superintendent
.....Structural Engineer	.....Employment Manager
.....Business Manager	.....Steam Engineer
.....Cert. Public Accountant	.....Foremanship
.....Accountant and Auditor	.....Sanitary Engineer
.....Bookkeeper	.....Surveyor (& Mapping)
.....Draftsman and Designer	.....Telephone Engineer
.....Electrical Engineer	.....Telegraph Engineer
.....Electric Light & Power	.....High School Graduate
.....General Education	.....Fire Insurance Expert

Name.....

Address.....

.....

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This is an actual photograph of Roscoe Arbuckle's hand holding an OMAR.

© 1921, A. T. Co.

Good nature is evident in the way Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle holds his **OMAR**

OmarOmar spells **Aroma**
OmarOmar *is* **Aroma**
Aroma makes a cigarette;
They've told you that for years
Smoke Omar for **Aroma.**

Thirteen kinds of choice Turkish and six kinds of selected Domestic tobaccos are blended to give Omar its delicate and distinctive **Aroma.**

They always go together—
Nuts and Raisins
Weber and Fields
Mocha and Java
and
OMAR and AROMA.

Guaranteed by
The American Tobacco Co.
—which means that if you don't like OMAR CIGARETTES you can get your money back from the dealer

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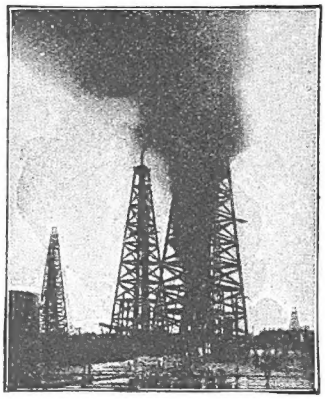

Oil Experts Make Millions

The history of the Oil Industry in the United States reads like a fable. No other industry is expanding so rapidly. From 377 million barrels in 1919 to 444 million barrels in 1920—an increase of 67 million barrels in a single year, gives you an idea of its growth. Two-thirds of all the oil used in the entire world is produced by the Oil Industry of the United States, the third of the country's great industries.

60,000 miles of oil pipe line with 5,000 miles of new line built every year—259,000 producing oil wells with 4,000 new wells drilled every month—1,712 new oil companies formed in 1920 with a capitalization of $2,786,814,000, tell briefly the magnitude of the oil industry in this country.

Oil, oil, more oil is the constant cry of America's industrial demands. Men, men, more men, the echo of this under-manned industry.

Be a Certified Petroleum Expert

Trained oil men in every branch of the oil industry are at a premium as never before. Geologists who locate oil fields—oil drillers—pipe line superintendents—pipe line builders—refiners (chemists and managers)—oil salesmen—oil mechanics—all earn from 2 to 10 times what similar time and labor in other fields bring.

$50 and Even $250 a Day

Unskilled mechanics readily get $10 and $15 a day—petroleum geologists earn $50 and even as high as $250 a day—oil salesmen earn $15,000 to $25,000 a year—all because there is a shortage of men in the oil industry. But fortune and progress reward only those who know the business.

A New Big Opportunity

No matter what your present business or education, there is some practical phase of the oil industry that will appeal to you that you can master and earn big money right from the start. Besides big earnings right from the beginning you are constantly with men who are making millions every year.

We Teach You How

Our practical course will teach you the geology of the oil fields, drilling methods, and the refining and marketing of oil.

Get Our Free Book

It tells all about this fascinating business for real men. Fully illustrated, packed full of facts about our course. It means success for you. The course costs very little—the book costs absolutely nothing. Yours for the asking. Get started now. Write us today.

Petroleum Extension University
Dept. 407, 165 E. Ontario Street, Chicago, Ill.

How to Develop a Grip of Steel

In the short period of ten days you can **double the** strength of your grip and increase the size of **your** forearm **2 inches** with the VICTOR MASTER **GRIP.** This ingenious apparatus is the most scientific as **well** as the most **practical** grip and forearm developer **ever** constructed. It is the result of years of study by **one** of the foremost physical culturists of the day.

The principle of the VICTOR MASTER GRIP **allows** for three different tensions—mild, medium and **strong, regulated as you progress.** Can be used with **one,** two or three springs making **three exercises in one.** Used by every member of the family. Will last a **life**time. Endorsed and used by professional strong **men,** boxers, wrestlers, oarsmen and practically every **gym**nasium. Made of the very best materials and **fully** guaranteed. Send for one today. Price only **$3.00.** Money back if not fully satisfied.

HENRY VICTOR
Dept. K10, 56 Cooper Sq., New York

10 MONTHS TO PAY

For this
Portable Typewriter

Now you can **buy the** famous, 9-pound **National Typewriter on** time—direct from the factory. Same as used by **thousands** of doctors, lawyers, bankers, salesmen, students, **writers** and business men in 31 countries. Every feature of **best,** standard size machines. 28 keys, 84 characters. **Brand** new—not a rebuilt typewriter. Neat, compact **carrying** case **free** with every machine. Send today for our **10 Days' Free Trial Offer and 10 Months' Easy Payment Plan.**

National Typewriter Co., **Dept. 141, *Fond du Lac, Wis.***

If You Can Tell it from a GENUINE DIAMOND *Send it back*

To prove our blue-white MEXICAN DIAMOND closely **resembles** a genuine diamond with same DAZZLING RAINBOW **FIRE,** we will send a selected 1 carat gem in Ladies' Solitaire Ring (Cat. price $4.98) for **Half Price to introduce, $2.63,** or in Gent's **Heavy** Tooth Belcher Ring (Cat. price $6.26) for $3.25. Our **finest 12k** Gold Filled mountings. GUARANTEED 20 YEARS. **SEND NO MONEY.** Just mail postcard or this ad. State Size. We will **mail** at once C. O. D. If not pleased return in 2 days for **money back** less handling charges. Write for **Free** Catalog. **Agents Wanted.**

MEXICAN DIAMOND IMPORTING CO., Dept. AE, Las Cruces, N. Mex.
(Exclusive controllers Mexican Diamonds)

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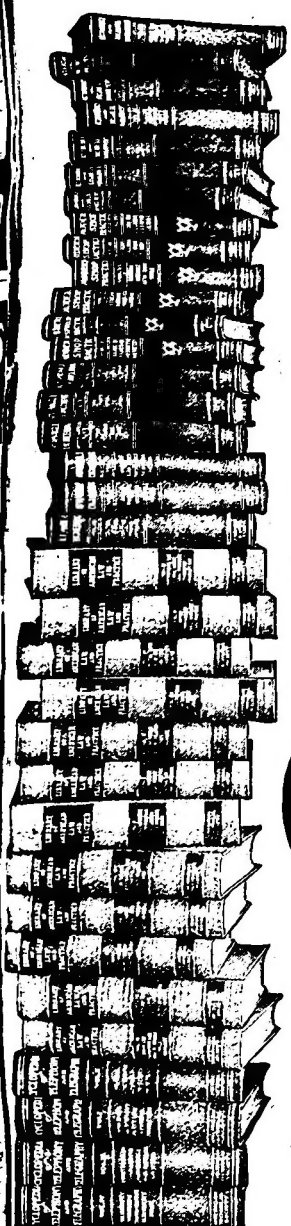
200,000 Men

Are Earning More With the Help of these Books



Every day men report increases in salary to us because of what they learned from these great books. Right now thousands are getting ready for bigger pay. By the end of this year a quarter-million men will be started on the road to real and lasting success.

What Other Men Have Done You Can Do Too

Don't you be content plodding along year after year, depending on hit-or-miss experience to get you a little raise now and then. It takes years of downright hard work to get ahead that way. Take the short cut. Cash in on what other men have learned on jobs just like yours. Take advantage of their knowledge gained from their lifetime of experiences on which these books are built. No matter what kind of work you are doing or would like to do —no matter whether you are a beginner or an old-timer—there are a set of these books to help you—written by the biggest and best known authorities we could find. Each set is the work of a dozen or more of these authorities—it's not a one man proposition.

Try These Books on Your Own Job

Everything you ought to know about the work you want to do is explained in plain, every day English that anybody can understand. Every book is illustrated with plans, pictures, blueprints and diagrams that help to make difficult problems easy. Every page gives you new and better ways of doing things, approved methods and money making facts you couldn't get any other way. You can be an expert in your choosen field if you will follow the path these books will make for you.

Don't Send Money—Coupon Brings the Books for Free Trial

Any Set You want Only 10¢ a Day

Select the set of Pay Raising Books that suits your work best and mail the coupon for free trial. Don't send any money. We ship the whole set for you to use a week just as though they were your own. You be the judge and decide with the books before you if they will do for you what they have done for 200,000 other men. Return them at our expense if they don't please you. The coupon below explains our free examination offer and the easy monthly payment plan on which you can buy the books you want. Check the coupon, fill in the blank lines and mail it today.

American Technical Society

Dept. X-107, Chicago, Illinois

American Technical Society, Dept. X-107, Chicago, U. S. A.

You may send me the set of Pay-Raising Books I have checked, by express collect for a week's FREE use. At the end of one week I will either return them at your expense or send you $2.00 as first payment and pay the balance of the reduced price as shown below in monthly payments of $3.00 each. If I purchase these books I am entitled to a membership in your society with full consulting privileges and FREE employment service.

Books in Set	Old Price	New Price
...Auto Engineering	6	$45.00	$24.80
...Carpentry and Contracting	5	37.50	24.80
...Practical Applied Electricity	8	60.00	34.80
...American Law and Practice	13	97.50	49.80
...Modern Civil Engineering	6	67.50	39.80
...Drawing	4	30.00	19.80
...Steam and Gas Engineering	7	52.50	29.80
...Fire Prevention and Insurance	4	$30.00	$19.80
...Modern Machine Shop Practice	6	45.00	24.80
...Accountancy and Business Management	7	52.50	29.80
...Sanitation, Heating and Ventilation	4	30.00	18.80
...Telephony and Telegraphy	4	30.00	19.80
...Employment Management and Safety	7	52.50	29.80

Name.....

Address.....Reference.....

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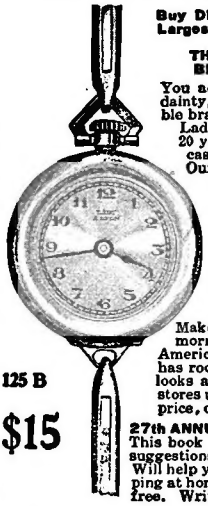
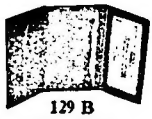
save money on Xmas Jewelry



Buy Direct from the World's Largest Mail Order Jewelers.

THIS $22.50 LADIES' BRACELET WATCH

You actually save $7.50 This dainty, plain, round convertible bracelet watch has 15 jewel Lady Alton movement and 20 yr. guaranteed gold filled case and bracelet. Our low price $15.00



129 B
BILL FOLD

Make some man happy Xmas morning with this genuine American Pigskin Bill Fold. It has roomy bill pocket, 3 folds, looks and wears well. Sold in stores up to $2. Our price, only $1.50

125 B
$15

27th ANNUAL GIFT BOOK—FREE
This book has 168 pages of Xmas suggestions in fine jewelry gifts. Will help you do your Xmas shopping at home and save money. It's free. Write for it.

Baird-North Co
824 BROAD ST., PROVIDENCE R.I.

Don't Wear a Truss

MR. C. E. BROOKS

Brooks' Appliance, the modern scientific invention, the wonderful new discovery that relieves rupture, will be sent on trial. No obnoxious springs or pads.

Brooks' Rupture Appliance

Has automatic Air Cushions. Binds and draws the broken parts together as you would a broken limb. No salves. No lies. Durable, cheap. Sent on trial to prove it. Protected by U. S. patents. Catalog and measure blanks mailed free. Send name and address today.
BROOKS APPLIANCE CO., 212F State St., Marshall, Mich.

ARMY BARGAINS

BRAND NEW

Cordovan Leather Puttees	$4.50 pr.
U.S. Marine Wool Blankets	3.00 ea.
O.D. Wool Shirts	2.75 ea.
O.D. Cotton Shirts	1.00 ea.
Officers' Belted Raincoats	4.85 ea.
O.D. Khaki Trousers	1.75 pr.
Hermann's U.S. Army Shoes	4.85 pr
Hermann's U.S. Navy Shoes	5.25 pr.
Officers' Cordovan Shoes	5.15 pr.
U.S.A. Ponchos	1.95 ea.
Excellent Quality Hip Boots	3.85 pr.

Add postage to above prices. Send 2c stamp for Fall Bargain Catalog No. 78. Money refunded if not satisfied.

ATLANTA ARMY STORES INC.
556-1 MARIETTA ST.
ATLANTA, GA.

A Position for You!

T. F. Oberkiser of Ohio

now owns a steadily growing, profitable subscription business on Butterick Magazines. To him, an answer to an ad like this meant an independent income. It can mean the same to *you.*

This is your opportunity to get a position where you will have a real future and interesting work.

You can earn all the money you want and work as many hours a day as you like, with no one to order you around.

You need no experience and no capital. We will help you build up a permanent, magazine subscription business of your own, paying you a regular income.

All this has been proved by the actual experience of thousands of our representatives. Make it a reality for yourself.

If you act at once and become our subscription representative you can get the renewals of hundreds of subscriptions that will be due this fall in your own community. For your work you will receive liberal commissions and a regular monthly salary. We instruct you fully and cooperate with you at all times. Simply write **today!**

Manager, Staff Agencies Division
Box 751, Butterick Building New York

NO MONEY DOWN 2 CREDIT ALL $2 A MONTH

Elgin, Waltham, Howard, Illinois
or any watch you want. Easy Payments and 30 days Free Trial. Send for Big
FREE CATALOG
112 pages wonderful values, diamonds, watches, rings, jewelry, up-to-date designs. Buy the **Ware Way,** you will never miss the money. Get posted. write today.
WARE DEALS SQUARE
ALFRED WARE CO., Dept. 313, St. Louis, Mo.

High School Course in 2 Years

You can complete this simplified High School Course at home inside of two years. Meets all requirements for entrance to college and the leading professions. This and thirty-six other practical courses are described in our Free Bulletin. Send for it TODAY.

AMERICAN SCHOOL
Dept. H-74 Drexel Ave. & 58th St., CHICAGO

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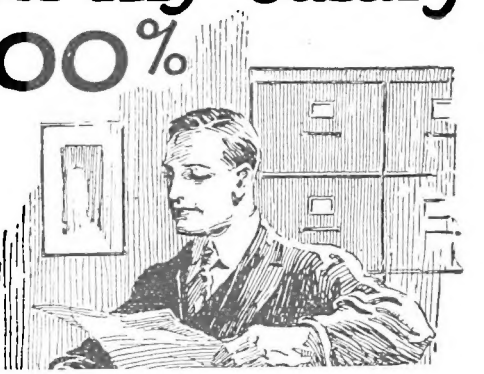
How I increased my salary more than 300%

by Joseph Anderson



I AM just the average man—twenty-eight years old, with a wife and a three-year-old youngster. I left school when I was fourteen. My parents didn't want me to do it, but I thought I knew more than they did.

I can see my father now, standing before me, pleading, threatening, coaxing me to keep on with my schooling. With tears in his eyes he told me how he had been a failure all his life because of lack of education—that the untrained man is always forced to work for a small salary—that he had hoped, yes, and prayed, that I would be a more successful man than he was.

But no! My mind was made up. I had been offered a job at nine dollars a week and I was going to take it.

That nine dollars looked awfully big to me. I didn't realize then, nor for years afterward, that I was being paid only for the work of my hands. My brain didn't count.

THEN one day, glancing through a magazine, I came across the story of a man just like myself. He, too, had left school when he was fourteen years of age, and had worked for years at a small salary. But he was ambitious. He decided that he would get out of the rut by training himself to become expert in some line of work.

So he got in touch with the International Correspondence Schools at Scranton and started to study in his spare time at home. It was the turn in the road for him—the beginning of his success.

Most stories like that tell of the presidents of great institutions who are earning $25,000 and $50,000 a year. Those stories frighten me. I don't think I could ever earn that much. But this story told of a man who, through spare time study, lifted himself from $25 to $75 a week. It made an impression on me because it talked in terms I could understand. It seemed reasonable to suppose that I could do as well.

I tell you it didn't take me long that time to mark and send in that familiar coupon. Information regarding the Course I had marked came back by return mail. I found it wasn't too late to make up the education I had denied myself as a boy.

I was surprised to find out how fascinating a home-study course could be. The I. C. S. worked with me every hour I had to spare. I felt myself growing. I knew there was a bigger job waiting for me somewhere.

Four months after I enrolled my employer came to me and told me that he always gave preference to men who studied their jobs—and that my next salary envelope would show how much he thought of the improvement in my work.

Today, my salary is more than 300% greater than it was when I began my studies. That increase has meant a better home and all the luxuries that make life worth while.

What I have done, you can do. For I am just an average man. I had no more education to begin with than you have—perhaps not as much. The only difference is a matter of training.

TO every man who is earning less than $75 a week, I say simply this:—*Find out what the I. C. S. can do for you!*

It will take only a minute of your time to mark and mail the coupon. But that one simple act may change your whole life.

If I hadn't taken that first step four years ago I wouldn't be writing this message to you today! No, and I wouldn't be earning anywhere near $75 a week, either!

TEAR OUT HERE

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS
BOX 2011-C SCRANTON, PA.

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October 30th 1921

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A GAMBLE with death between an inhuman political boss and fearless, clean-cut *Dan Wheeler*, with two priceless jewels of the Orient as the big stake. "SLED WHEELER AND THE NAMELESS ORDER," by John I. Cochrane, a three-part story, starts in the next issue.

EVEN the pirates of the Spanish Main winced at the insatiable cruelty of the young French fanatic. He scorned gold, women, glory—but the terrible nature of his ambition was devastating. "THE EXTERMINATOR," by J. Allan Dunn, a novelette, complete in the next issue.

Other stories in the next issue are forecast on the last page of this one.

Don't forget the new dates of issue for *Adventure*—the 10th, 20th and 30th of each month

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Adventure

OCTOBER 30 1921
VOL XXXI NO. 3

A Complete Novel

WOLF LAW

By HUGH PENDEXTER

Author of "The Road to Eldorado," "The Torch-Bearers," etc.

CHAPTER I

RED SHOT WINS

ROUTINE drudgery could not quench the adventurous spirit of Jefferson de Croteau. A similar quality of enthusiasm had led his father, Étienne de Croteau, into the Rocky Mountains after beaver, and to Santa Fé after Mexican silver. And Missouri in 1868 was no environment for hot-bloods who would mend their ways.

There was this difference between father and son: de Croteau senior had made his own fortune while the son lacked an industrious inclination and shone only as a prodigal. Madame de Croteau in great bewilderment watched this offspring of hers develop, much as a dove might be amazed after mothering a goshawk. De Croteau in turn furtively studied the little matron, still wearing the charm of her girlhood, and, much puzzled, would ask himself:

"Is it she who is the mother of this young devil? *Parbleu!* But never does he take it from my side of the blood. And I named him after M'sieu Jefferson, one of our great ones. Devil eat a name that doesn't keep a man from acting the madman!"

Despite frequent soliloquies of this nature de Croteau senior was immensely proud of his only child. They were much alike in outward appearance, these two—slim and wiry and of medium height, and with all the natural grace of movement of their race. They had the same quality of temper, fiery upheavals without warning; and the same saving grace of penitence when in the wrong.

Almost all the trouble young de Croteau experienced resulted from his reckless gaiety when in drink. With the wine in a perverse imp came out, and yet his pranks were impelled more by an impulse to mischief than by an inclination to offend. He was continually involved in predicaments which he had never anticipated, and as often he solemnly vowed he would never do the like again.

His mother was taken by strangers to be

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his sister, and her serious way when scolding him for misdemeanors was wonderful to behold. When called to her morning-room to explain what all St. Louis might be talking about he would meekly seat himself at her tiny feet and bow his handsome head under her severe gaze.

"Thou graceless one, what is this I hear?" she would sternly begin, tilting her head to approve of his clean-cut profile.

"A big man asked me to present him to my young sister. Alas, *maman*, when I tried to set him right he laughed at me. Who laughs at a de Croteau——"

"Thou silly one! Be careful in your stories if you would not have Étienne de Croteau after you. *Monsieur* will take care of all big men. Now, sir, the truth!"

Whereat he would humbly confess his fault, hiding nothing, and conclude with a shower of compliments. With a prayerful wish that he would be more decorous she would pat his black locks and tell him he was quite perfect, and he would swing her off her feet and swear that his days of error were ended. Then he would go forth and unintentionally blunder into new escapades.

It finally resulted that de Croteau made the stern resolve that the young man should go to work, and sent him to Springfield where he was to enter the establishment of Enoch Lascar, trader. Young de Croteau found his cope for deviltry somewhat curtailed in the bustling little city.

The St. Louis & San Francisco Railroad would not reach the Queen of the Ozarks for two years, but already the civic pulse was quickening. Although its population was less than seven thousand de Croteau soon discovered that human nature does not depend on census returns. A few kindred spirits quickly reconciled him to his new home. His father's reputation as a successful mountain man won him his place in the Lascar store.

When he cared to apply himself he could exercise clear judgment; heredity had equipped him with a natural bent for business. His advance was rapid; and more than once he was asked to give advice on some project.

This confidential relation brought him into contact with Jessie Lascar, the merchant's daughter. She was imperious with her adorers, and because the young stranger wooed her boldly, as became a de Croteau, she decided he was desirable. Nor did her father discourage her choice.

One day after he had completed six months of satisfactory service he received a letter from his father, a strange combination of fiery adjurations and terms of endearment. Among other things his father wrote:

A man will soon call to see you, Simon Santey by name. Yes, you young limb, he is one of the Santeys whom I and my father, and my father's father, have fought in Mississippi and Tennessee.

But since the war many things have changed. Too many men have been killed. And this last of the Santeys is not like his fathers.

Ciel! What fighters they were! I remember old Ardmore Santey, who killed your great-grandfather, and who in turn was killed.

But your lady mother will be reading this. I desist. I remain silent.

You speak of M. Lascar's increasing business and your part in it. Your mother admires. I applaud.

I wish you to make room for young Santey if you can. The feud is dead. He is a most excellent bookkeeper. There is no one worth fighting left.

I wish you to receive him kindly. He is not one to go ahead, but he will be faithful and persistent in his work.

Old Ardmore Santey was a very gallant man. He died very hard. I doubt if he could write his name. This last of the race has ink in place of blood in his veins. He knows nothing of knife or pistol. He is a good bookkeeper.

So it came about that in the beginning of the Indian Summer, when the prevailing southerly winds were not quite ready to give way for northern blasts, when the dropping of nuts in the oak groves sounded like fairy footsteps and the mystifying haze half hid the surrounding hills and bedecked with filmy violet the rugged southern country, the last of the de Croteaus and the Santeys met.

"A booky sort of a fellow. No spirit," was de Croteau's instant verdict.

Santey, however, had the high quality of being much in earnest. If he burned with none of the old feud lust he was all the better bookkeeper for that fact.

De Croteau did almost all the talking when they met. He switched irrelevantly from topic to topic. Santey gravely listened.

Within a week this virtue of being attentive reversed de Croteau's first verdict. Santey was a most excellent fellow.

De Croteau, being relieved of much routine, was sent by his employer to Jefferson City and Booneville to transact business. During these trips the young man mingled

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much with wild bloods. He loved to back a horse, to back a hand at cards, to back his skill as a revolver shot—and this form of a wager he usually won. And more than once he backed himself against the table in drinking-bouts. He did his work, and did it well, however, and if Lascar ever detected signs of dissipation he said nothing; nor did he seek to discourage de Croteau's visits to the house.

CONDITIONS throughout the Western States were still unsettled, and the last backwash of the Civil War was bringing a confused state of affairs to older communities than Springfield. Various guerrilla bands that had committed atrocious crimes during the war under the guise of partizanship still ruled lonely stretches of country in the border States.

Below the southern border Arkansas was proclaiming martial law to suppress a secret organization's war against the established State Government. From the Southwest and West rode desperadoes to reap their harvest. Their day was ending, but their booty blinded them to the fact.

De Croteau was inoffensive in his wildness. De Croteau senior was surprized to have Lascar inform him that the young man was born for business. And incidentally the young people appeared to be deeply devoted to each other; de Croteau with somplete abandon, Jessie with a certain reserve, something of her merchant father's mental reservations when seemingly willing to embark on a new enterprise.

Another caller at the house was Santey; only his visits were never of a purely social nature. He always brought an account-book under his arm. When he was presented to Miss Jessie he appraised her solemnly. She laughed at him at first and mimicked him to de Croteau, who generously took the fellow's part.

Then she ceased to make game of him and fell to studying him; this because she discovered an inability to classify and tag him. De Croteau wore his thoughts on his tongue. There was no mystery about him; he was obvious and direct as a mountain brook. Santey might be hiding anything in the depths of his silences.

What forced her to respect him, although against her will, was her failure when she tried to embarrass him. She arrived at the conclusion that he was forever weighing people, as one weighs merchandise. A desire to learn how she figured in his estimation was a logical result.

One wonderful night when she had been very pensive she suddenly told de Croteau—

"That Simon is very deep."

De Croteau laughed in great amusement.

"Poor old Simon!" he said. "Deep? Not quite as deep as Wilson's Creek. I really believe, Jessie, that you're inclined to make a mystery out of a very painstaking bookkeeper."

"When he takes pains with his work, or anything else, it's because he looks far ahead to some place he plans to arrive at," she replied. "He's a man who always has a definite purpose before him. Why can't you have a purpose?"

"But I have. Before me, too. And she is very beautiful!" he told her.

"You know what I mean, Jeff. Why can't you settle down—select your mark and hit it?"

He smiled rather ruefully, and protested:

"But I'm good as gold, Jessie. How would you have honest old Jefferson de Croteau changed?

"Beware, girl. You are tampering with unknown forces. Women think they can make over their men and improve on the original job, but they're holding a lighted Corinthian tallow peach-wicked candle over an open keg of gunpowder."

She refused to subscribe to his nonsense, however. Instead she gravely asked—

"What's this I hear about your racing horses?"

"Only a bit of fun. One must have some relaxation, you know."

"You're to have another race here very soon?"

"Can't back out of it, Jessie. Probably will be my last."

And, he sighed dismally. Then with a flash of enthusiasm he added:

"Dr. Roman—title by courtesy—is bringing his mare down to run against Red Shot. I'll beat him easy. I ride my mount.

"His Jefferson City friends expect to find a lot of easy money. But we'll show 'em, Jessie. These gamblers get foolish notions sometimes."

"You like gamblers, don't you?"

"Oh, doc's a good fellow. Lots of gamblers are. He simply makes a living betting on horses and cards instead of on the rise and fall of merchandise."

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"Hardly the same thing," she demurred.

"Lord, Jessie! What a preacher you would have made!"

"My sermons don't seem to do much good. Why not call this race off?"

"Why, Jessie! I can't. My friends have put up their money. They'd lose. They'd think—why, I don't know what they wouldn't think. It's impossible."

"Not even if I ask it?"

"But you wouldn't ask such a thing, no matter how much you're set against racing. After this is over we'll strike some sort of a bargain. I'll stick to anything I promise. You know that."

"Very well. We'll talk again after this race."

"But you'll wish me luck, won't you?"

"I wish you all the luck in the world in everything that's desirable. If you must run this race I ask you not to be rash. I've heard you've been very rash more than once."

"Never again, Jessie. I'll back Red Shot of course. I must do it. My friends have put up their money already. Why, Doc Roman's crowd is so sure of winning that they're laying three to one. I could clean up a small fortune.

"Now just to please you I'll promise to stake not a penny over a thousand. Come, if that isn't proof of my love then you don't know anything about horse-races."

"You promise that on your honor?"

"Confound it, Jessie! Why set terms? I said I promise. I promise on my honor."

And he groaned lugubriously as he thought of the chance he was letting slip. Then he became his old cheery self as he found that his sacrifice was ennobling him. He believed he was acting very generously, and he enjoyed the rôle.

"I do not want you to have a set of friends whom I can't meet," she warned him. "I'm afraid I should find such a situation impossible."

This pronounced attitude on the part of one he was eager to make his wife nonplused him. All men of his acquaintance relaxed when outside the home circle. It was the manners of the age for benedict to keep up some of the bachelor pleasures. Surely there was no harm in cards and horses and drinking-bouts, and a dutiful wife should rejoice in possessing a husband who was not a nose-to-the grindstone sort of a fellow.

But if Jessie's advanced views cast a bit of a shadow over his happiness it was only for a moment. The de Croteaus saw but one objective at a time. Marriage was his goal. And after all perhaps he would desire to change his mode of living.

Beyond all doubt his father had slipped on a yoke when he married the little mother, only *maman* had her way while making her husband believe he was always following his own inclination. Jessie was not that subtle. She would have her way with all the airs of a conqueror. He shook off the disagreeable thought and murmured—

"You and I will be sufficient to each other, sweetheart."

"I think so," she quietly replied. "I have no patience with a woman who mopes at home while her husband is leading a gay life in taverns or on the race-course.

"Ah, there is Mr. Santey. He and papa have had a long session."

Santey was leaving the house, a book under his arm. The girl called to him and he joined them. The girl asked—

"What do you think about Mr. de Croteau's Red Shot beating the Jefferson City mare, Mr. Santey?"

"Oh, Mr. de Croteau will win, Miss Lascar. He has a way of winning," Santey promptly replied.

"And I suppose you will wager something," she bantered.

"I? Oh, no, Miss Lascar. I might be tempted to bet on an absolutely sure thing, and that wouldn't be gambling. But a horse-race, like a woman, always has an element of doubt."

And, replacing his hat, he moved on into the soft warm dusk.

"Hang the fellow!" laughed de Croteau. "He's rather cold-blooded. No sportsmanship on betting on an absolutely sure thing."

"I suppose not," she murmured; and, speaking rather absent-mindedly, she added: "Still, if he sticks to that rule he'll never come home and tell his wife that he's gambled away their home. That must be very painful for a man to do. One of father's friends had to do it."

"I have no sympathy for a man who makes a fool of himself," was the brusk retort.

"No one does. It's permitted us to sympathize with the wife, though." De Croteau decided it was a subject to be dropped, and in a lighter tone he remarked:

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"Old Simon seems to figure fair young ladies in the same category with horse-races. Didn't suppose he ever gave women a thought."

"I've always told you he was a deep one," she reminded. "And I'm afraid he's rather wise for his years."

They parted on the best of terms, de Croteau ardent and the girl holding herself in check. But as he walked back to his boarding-house he carried with him something that almost amounted to a misgiving. He could not analyze it; he only knew he had not experienced the sensation before after a call on Jessie.

DURING the few days intervening before the race de Croteau had no time for introspection. His friends were besieging him to be assured for the hundredth time as to Red Shot's condition. Scouts were in town acting for Roman and his cohorts. Important meetings had to be held at drinking-places, where the reports were received concerning the condition of the gambler's fleet mare.

De Croteau saw Jessie infrequently during those hectic days; nor did she reproach him for his absence. She carried herself as one who waited for something to be ended. De Croteau may have half-guessed her mood; perhaps he let himself go more than usual because of the growing conviction that his period of freedom was about to be curtailed.

Lascar told his daughter one night after entering the living-room and learning that de Croteau was not coming that evening:

"Jeff almost worries me at times. Now it's this cursed horse-race. Why doesn't he settle down? He does his work all right—never was keener on collections—but he should stop it. If it's a farewell prance, all right."

"That's what it is, I'm sure," she quietly assured him. "And I fancy he realizes."

"Well, that's good."

And Lascar felt much relieved. He added:

"If Jeff could have Santey's persistence and stick-to-it habits without losing any of his snap and vim he'd make his mark inside of ten years. He needs a Spanish bit and a strong hand."

At last came the day of the race. It was to be run on the Kickapoo prairie a few miles out of town. On the way out George West, a crony of de Croteau's, reined aside and asked de Croteau to give him a moment.

"Some of the boys are saying that you've put up only a thousand on your horse, Jeff."

"That's correct, George."

"But it's all wrong, Jeff. I've bet much more'n that. You're my friend. My purse is yours. You must let me act your banker. We must clean out Roman's crowd so they'll know they've had a race."

De Croteau flushed and confessed:

"I don't lack for money, George. I've bet all I can."

West stared at him in amazement. He could scarcely believe his ears. This, his friend of the plunging habits, a man who would lose his last dollar out of pure recklessness?

"Do you mean that, de Croteau?" he demanded.

"Don't I usually mean what I say?" retorted de Croteau coldly. "The more you put up the more you will win. I shall surely run the mare off her legs. I'm much obliged for your offer, though."

"Don't mention it," was the icy reply; and West spurred into the road.

De Croteau regretted his promise to Jessie. It had forced a doubt into the mind of a friend. He was in quite a savage mood when he reached the course, and for once he wished the race was over.

Two more friends came to him and anxiously inquired about Red Shot. He knew what was in their minds; they were wondering why he did not back to the limit his confidence in the horse. He advised them to plunge, and they were undecided whether to do so or hedge their bets when the mare and Red Shot entered the track.

De Croteau rode, and Roman had brought with him a spider of a man to pilot his mare. When they lined up to take the word the Jefferson City contingent seemed to be doing most of the shouting, pleading for Red Shot money at three to one.

"You don't seem to have much confidence in your local nag," Roman said to West.

"Here's two thousand. It's all I've got. Put up and shut up," growled West.

The race was run; and to the great disgust of Roman and his friends, and to the wild joy of the Springfield men, de Croteau had no difficulty in running the mare off her feet, even as he had predicted. West

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hurried to be the first to congratulate the winner.

"It's a muddle to me, but I emptied my pockets after our talk on the road, Jeff. I couldn't stand for Doc Roman's ghastly grin. But, oh, why didn't you plunge?"

"I couldn't, George," sighed de Croteau. "I was fool enough to make a promise. I knew I was losing my big chance. I knew I was losing three dollars for every dollar I held back. What hurt worst, though, was that you fellows should doubt me."

"Nonsense, Jeff," cried West with the warm generosity of a big winner. "It was only human nature that eyebrows should go up when you limited your wager to a thousand. We didn't know anything about a promise. For Heaven's sake don't make any more of those fool promises, Jeff.

"Now we're all going to Creole Pete's for a snack and a few drinks. Roman's taking it nicely. He and his friends are to be our guests. Ha, ha! It's their money that's paying the shot. Come along, long face."

DE CROTEAU'S mercurial spirits rose. After all three thousand dollars was a big killing for him to make. He felt very virtuous in having kept his promise. He knew his lease of riotous nights was about to expire.

He gladly accompanied West, determined to make the evening a fitting climax to all his bachelor days. Roman congratulated him, but did so with a slight smile that brought a flush of embarrassment to de Croteau's face.

"I didn't know until you were on the course that you were limiting yourself to the safety zone, de Croteau," remarked the gambler in his smooth voice.

For a moment de Croteau burned to challenge him to another race, to wager all he possessed and to add thereto the round sum he had collected that morning on store accounts, and which he had not yet deposited in the big safe. He felt resentment against Jessie for having placed him in such a position.

"A sure thing is scarcely a gamble, Roman," de Croteau replied. "I won all I cared to take down. And three thousand, while an insignificant sum for you to drop on one wager, is a good day's work for me. I'm satisfied."

Roman's hard face remained impassive, but his eyes glittered ominously. He restrained a deadly impulse, however, and appeared to enter into the jollification which soon filled the low dining-room of Creole Pete's place on the outskirts of the city. The drinking commenced at once, the losers imbibing deeply to drown their disappointment, the winners knowing no restraint in celebrating their victory.

De Croteau was soon in high humor. Jessie was a very wise little woman. He quite idealized her as he clinked glasses and received praise for his horse and for his riding. He considered himself to be a figure of consequence.

He had dropped money to Roman at cards on several business trips to the river towns, and this revenge was very sweet. He even rallied the gambler as they lined up to the bar for a final drink before partaking of Creole Pete's tasty spread. Roman sipped wine while others drank whisky, and seemed to be taking the banter in the spirit it was intended; that is, good-naturedly.

Seated at the long table the merriment increased. Challenges to other races, to cards, on the spot or in the river towns, were tossed back and forth good-humoredly. Roman smiled but did not indulge in the pleasantry. However, he was never a demonstrative fellow. The candles were lighted, the dishes were cleared away, and more liquor was ordered. Suddenly Roman's cold voice penetrated the chorus of nonsense and silenced every tongue by saying:

"Rather queer, de Croteau, you didn't fancy your nag enough to put up more money. I've taken your paper up-river and would have done the same today, you know."

De Croteau, although feeling warm-hearted under the stimulus of the victory and the liquor, took warning at the edge of the gambler's mocking voice and stiffly replied:

"I wagered all I cared to. I've remarked that to you once before."

He sat at the head of the table and Roman sat at the foot. The diners leaned back and stared from flushed face to pale face. Roman laughed and said:

"It was quite plain you didn't care to risk any more money. That is, you held back until a certain time."

The laugh alone was a slap in the face. De Croteau hoarsely warned him—

"Perhaps you fail to realize that you're making yourself offensive."

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Roman's smile broadened. He quickly retorted—

"Perhaps if you'd been sure who was to ride the mare, whether I or a jockey, you'd have placed more money on your nag."

Every man held his breath. De Croteau's flushed face bleached out, his pallor being accentuated by his black hair and black eyes. Some men grow red of face when angry; others lose color. The latter perhaps are more deadly as their rage is less choleric and more enduring.

"Roman, just what do you mean? And be —— quick!" de Croteau hissed down the table.

"I mean you fouled my jockey at the back of the course; that you wouldn't have dared to try it on me."

It came back like the crack of a bull-whip lash.

"You are a liar!" de Croteau softly branded him, leaning forward, his hands gripping the table.

Roman kicked back his chair and thrust a hand inside his coat. De Croteau likewise got his chair clear of the table, but was still seated when the gambler sprang to his feet.

It seemed to the onlookers that the two pulled their weapons almost together, with Roman having a shade of a start. The two reports were blurred in one. A lock of de Croteau's long black hair jumped clear of his head. Roman turned half-around and crashed over his chair to the floor.

Rising and staring stupidly at the silent figure, de Croteau slowly replaced the long Colt revolver and then swung his dull gaze along the two lines of dazed faces. For a few seconds the man on the floor was not more motionless than the diners. Then chairs were kicked back and sent crashing to the wall or floor. Creole Pete raised a thin wail of terror.

There was a jostling, crowding movement toward Roman. De Croteau, rigid and staring, waited for the verdict. Greene County officers had served ample warning against gun-play. Disgrace at the least; a trial and imprisonment if the man be mortally hurt.

In the minute afforded him while the men were examining the quiet body de Croteau saw his hopes, his ambitions, his love, all go toppling over the cliff. He saw his mother lose the miracle of her girlish charms and become an old woman.

He struck his hand violently across his forehead as if striving to awaken himself from a hideous nightmare. Then he drew back in great fear as George West worked his way from the kneeling group and furtively wiped his hands on Creole Pete's snowy table-cloth. De Croteau felt deathly sick as he saw the red stains left on the cloth.

"How is he, George?" faintly whispered de Croteau as his friend came to him.

"Dead," was the low reply.

Then with a side-glance at the group of men he seized de Croteau's arm and pulled him through the doorway. Savage voices called on him to return. Other voices, those of his friends, yelled for him to ride for it.

"I'll stay," gasped de Croteau.

"Fool! Ride south. Get into the mountains. Hide till we fix it up."

"Oh, my ——! I'm ruined, George! My mother—Jessie!"

"We'll hold them back. Make it fast. Beat the news into Springfield. See the girl, but only for a minute. We'll fight for you with her and old Lascar. But go! Go!"

And he pushed de Croteau toward the shed sheltering Red Shot and then ran to the door where de Croteau's friends already were holding the threshold.

IT WAS raining when de Croteau entered Springfield. Although realizing that the news of the tragedy could not yet have reached town, he took a roundabout way in gaining the Lascar home. His black hair glistened with wet and his face was drawn and of wax color, like that of a corpse, as he left his horse at the hedge and ran up the path.

Jessie was alone and standing by the open window. He called her name, and she knew that something had happened to disturb their lives. She hurried to the hall and joined him on the vine-screened veranda.

"What is it, Jeff?" she fiercely demanded.

"That race! Bad for me. I'm in trouble and must light out," he groaned.

"You broke your promise? You lost all your money?" she cried.

"Hush! Not so loud. It's worse than that."

"You've lost money that didn't belong to you?"

And her voice was hard as metal striking on metal.

"I've killed a man," he abruptly informed her.

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CHAPTER II

FLIGHT

IT SEEMED an interminable time to him that she stood there speechless. Then her hands slowly sought the veranda post, but were powerless to grip it for support. And her slight form would have collapsed had he not caught her in his arms. This physical contact imbued her with strength, and she struggled to free herself and staggered back from him.

"You come to me with murder—" she shrilly began.

"Murder? Great heavens, no! It was self-defense. Roman tried to shoot me. It was he or I. The boys say I must go into hiding till the excitement dies down. But I'll stay and face it."

"And disgrace me doubly," she groaned. "If you have left any respect for me ride away at once. That is your horse down at the hedge? Then go!"

"Oh, Jessie, Jessie! Can't you give me some kinder word than that to take with me?" he pleaded.

"What kind of a word do you leave with me?" she fiercely countered, her voice quivering with hysteria. "You can hide among strangers. I must hold up my head where every one knows me. You weren't content with having me, with living decently and soberly. You must go on and on until you'd spoiled your life and spoiled my life.

"Now go. I hope for my sake and your mother's sake you won't be caught. But I don't want to see you again."

"Good-by!" And he was running to the hedge. She watched him leap into the saddle and heard the hoof-beats carrying him into the night and out of her life with no lessening of the hard, tense lines in her beautiful face.

But de Croteau was not yet done with Springfield. Her belief that he had wagered and lost another's money reminded him of an imperative errand. He raced down a side-street and breathed in great relief as he saw a light in a rear room of his boarding-house. His own rooms, for he boasted two, were in the front. He left his horse at the fence, ran to the lighted window and rapped on the rain-smeared glass. The curtain was pushed aside and Simon Santey stared questioningly into the set face.

"Open the window."

De Croteau's lips framed the words but did not utter them aloud.

Santey raised the window and gasped:

"Lord! You, de Croteau? What mad prank is this? You look like a ghost. Come round to the door."

"No. Our business is transacted here. Blow out that light."

Santey did as he was bid and returned to the window. De Croteau thrust his head and shoulders over the sill and in a broken voice explained:

"I've killed Doc Roman, the gambler. Self-defense. I swear I had to, or go myself, Simon. The boys say I must run for it; must lie low for a while."

"Killed Roman? Good work, Jeff. He was a vicious dog. But I wish some one else had done for him. Yes; it's best you go. Best for all."

"I've seen her," bitterly de Croteau informed Santey, sensing Santey's meaning. "If it were not for her I'd stay and face it out."

"And be a fool. You must get out and stay out till it's fixed up. Your father and Lascar have influence. I'll write about it to your father. I'll talk with Lascar. What else can I do? Command me."

"Try to make Jessie understand it isn't as bad as she thinks. Good Heavens! She looks on me as a murderer, Simon."

"Nerves. Women are foolish under a shock. Do you need money?"

"I have plenty. My cursed winnings. I came here to leave some store money. Turn it in. It's on the Blake & Carter account. They called me in when I was on my way to the race-track.

"Lascar will rage. I don't blame him. Yet I swear, Simon, I never went to a race with a lighter heart. Roman dogged me into it. I'd always liked him before, even when he won my money. But he dogged me into it. He accused me of fouling the jockey.

"It was at Pete's, at the supper-table. Like a shot out of a gun Roman jumped me and said things no man can take. He started to pull first. He beat me by a second in getting his gun clear. But he lost that second in raising his gun while I shot from the hip. His lead scalped off a lock of my hair. And I did for him. God help me!"

"Bah! It's a good job. One that ought to have been done long ago. You run for it. I'll smooth old Lascar down. I'll have a

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talk with the sheriff. Keep away for three or four months. Then send me word and I'll reply by your messenger, telling you how things are. Keep up your courage. It'll be all right."

"And the girl? You'll talk to her?"

"That's something different," slowly said Santey after a bit of hesitation. "Miss Jessie isn't the kind that lets folks talk to her. You've talked to her. If your talk doesn't make her reasonable no man's talk can.

"Just put that out of your mind. Your job is to keep clear and out of jail. The girl part can wait. Anything in your rooms you want?"

"My other gun. It's in the belt. The molds and powder-flask are on the table."

Unconscious of the rain dripping down on his back, he remained with his head and shoulders over the sill while Santey ran up-stairs. In a few minutes Santey returned and passed out the heavy belt and the loading accouterments. As de Croteau buckled the belt he said:

"Simon, you're the only one to give me a kind word. I was wishing I was dead. Now I'll try and fight it out.

"I gave you the store money? Of course. Good-by, old fellow. I shall not forget."

He found the other's hand in the darkness and gave it a mighty squeeze. Then he was over the fence and in the saddle and galloping to make the great interior road which stretches from the Mississippi in Marion County down into Arkansas and on to the Red River settlements.

When he crossed the James fork of White River, ten miles from town at a place known as the Old Delaware Towns, he thought he heard sounds of pursuit. He halted on the southern bank and listened; but only the *drip, drip,* of the rain falling on the white oaks reached his ears. He walked his horse through the deepening mud without even a blanket to protect him.

It was midnight when he reached Ozark.

The town was asleep except for one house on the outskirts where a light burned.

He approached this, thinking to buy food against the morrow, but a glance through the curtainless window told him there was no food for sale. The interior of the room was marked by poverty. A woman sat on the side of a bed, pillowing a sick man's head on her arm while she gave him medicine.

De Croteau fished a bank-note from an inside pocket and slipped it under the door. As he stole away he envied the invalid and his poverty.

South of the town he halted in a dense growth of white oak on Bull Creek. Using his saddle for a pillow, he threw himself down on the wet ground and settled himself to wait for the first light.

HE DOZED and awoke and slept again, and at last sat up to find the sunlight filtering through the forest crown and steaming a large colony of wraiths out of the wet soil. Overhead was alive with the chatter of squirrels. He got to his feet, exercised his stiffened limbs and spoke encouragingly to his dejected horse. Red Shot was not the same animal that had won for him less than twenty-four hours back.

Twenty-four hours! De Croteau would not believe it. An eternity had intervened between yesterday's careless, happy morning and this miserable awakening. He dared not let his thoughts dwell on his mother, and only by forcing himself to think of immediate problems could he make existence possible.

He knew that Forsyth was about twenty-five miles to the south, but he feared to go there. The men of his mother's family had ridden up and down the road, fighting for the South, while Étienne de Croteau had pursued and had been chased along the same thoroughfare.

But it was not the ghosts of the contending armies that Jefferson de Croteau feared. Bushrod Williams, sheriff of Greene County, was as shrewd as he was determined. The majesty of the law being flouted, the sheriff would send swift riding deputies along all roads leading from Springfield with orders to turn back only when convinced they were following a false trail. One of Williams' first moves would be to send men down the main highway to prevent the fugitive from slipping across the border into Arkansas.

So de Croteau decided to travel but a few miles and then leave the road to strike due east and ultimately take to the lonely river-bottoms below Rockbridge and near the southern border of Ozark County. He had first thought to hide in the unknown fastnesses of the hills, and at the outset of his flight he came near to chancing his luck along the Woods fork of the Gasconade as

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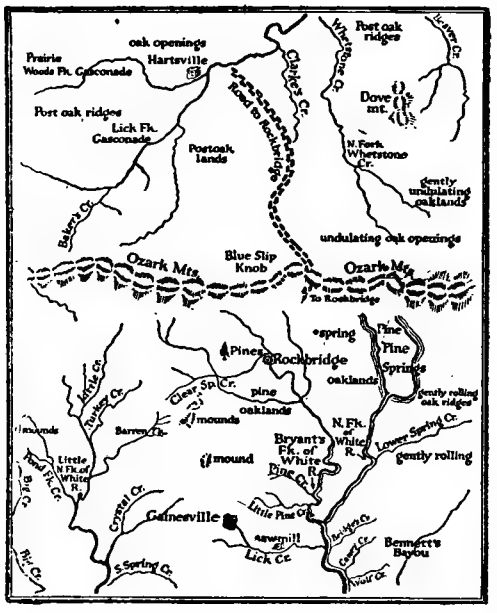
far as Hartsville in Wright County, whence he could follow the Rockbridge Road down to Blue Slip Knob and into the heart of the Ozarks. Weighed against any advantages possessed by the hills was the abundance of game along the river-bottoms and in the bear-rough along the border, and the proximity of the sparsely settled country of northern Arkansas.

Regaining the road, he allowed Red Shot to take his time until he should get warmed up. The high-strung animal was displeased and depressed over his rough experience.



Excellent quarters, assiduous attention and the best of rations had been his lot. Now it was dampness, mud, a bit of grazing.

But as the miles slipped behind and the sunshine continued mellow the animal's head began to lift and the stiffened muscles began to respond to the desire for a scamper. He tossed his head to show approval of his wide freedom, and pricked up his ears as a voice called from up the road. He hoped it would be a race, and began stepping daintily until any presuming creature should range alongside.

De Croteau knew it must be a race, only he did not wait to observe the conventions. One backward glance and he had recognized Bushrod Williams and a deputy. Both officers were brandishing rifles. But their horses were inferior stock and were sadly fagged. Touching a heel to his mount, de Croteau flashed down the road pursued by a brace of bullets. As the lead flew high he knew his pursuers were warning him to stop and had not commenced shooting in earnest.

He rounded a bend in the road, his right stirrup scraping the bushes, with the lead clipping close to his head. Then he called on Red Shot to do his best in making the next turn, and after that the two men sighted him but once. When he left the road and turned to the east he believed he had hidden his trail sufficiently to deceive the sheriff.

Now the traveling became rough, for he was following no road. He considered it a stroke of luck when he found a game-trail running in the desired direction. Misery had killed hunger, but when the sun was overhead he realized that he must eat. Drawing a revolver, he soon had an opportunity to prove his marksmanship by shooting a ruffled grouse that was "dusting" in the narrow trail far ahead.

Turning Red Shot loose at the first opening to graze on the blue-stem grass, he found a pine stump, made a fire and broiled his game after a fashion and ate it without seasoning. The sun had partly dried his sodden clothing, but his blood was sluggish, and for the next few miles he walked with the horse at his heels. By late afternoon he descended a long slope of an oak ridge and followed down a fork of White River and crossed near the mouth of Caney Creek.

Now he obtained his first intimation of a settlement. Several smokes, widely scattered, were rising above the oak and walnut growths. The discovery hardly suited him, and he mounted and pressed forward more rapidly, still making east, to leave the smokes behind him.

The crack of a rifle and the whistle of a bullet brought his head about with a jerk. Up the slope were Sheriff Williams and his deputy. Through the scattered clumps of oak he sent Red Shot in a mad scramble, his blood hot at the insistence of his trailers.

There could be but one thing worse than his condition as a fugitive—to be taken ignominiously back to Springfield as a prisoner, to be placed in jail like a common criminal. Turning in his saddle, he took two long shots with his Colt and had the satisfaction of seeing the sheriff's animal rear and paw the air. Then the horse came

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under control and was coming down the slope under a fresh burst of speed, evidencing that it had not been seriously hurt.

De Croteau was now determined to die fighting. It would afford rather a dignified climax to the thoroughly wretched affair. Death would terminate his mental anguish and solve all his problems. He fought against picturing his little mother's grief over his demise for fear he would utterly lose his nerve and find himself a prisoner.

He fired twice more at the down-sweeping horsemen and wondered at the loud echo of his last shot. And while he marveled the echo was repeated although the revolver was silent. A puff of smoke, lazily rising from a clump of bushes on his left, solved the phenomenon. A third factor, and one friendly to him, was added to the equation. He swerved his horse toward the hidden marksman.

The rifles behind him cracked again. The rifle in the oaks discharged. A yell of rage brought de Croteau's eyes to the rear. The two officers were scampering for their lives up the slope. Throwing himself to the ground and panting from excitement, de Croteau waited.

After a few minutes the bushes were violently agitated and a tall, loosely built man crawled out and approached at a lazy lope. He trailed his rifle and was barefooted, and was clad in jeans and a snuff-colored shirt. His yellow hair was long and matted, and was his only head covering. His beard grew unevenly and was the color of straw. As he came within hailing distance of de Croteau he opened a large mouth in a wide grin and saluted:

"Howdy, stranger. You 'pear to be in a mortal hurry to hit this chunk of country."

"I'm much obliged to you and your rifle," replied de Croteau. "I still am in Missouri, I take it?"

THE big man dug a toe into the black clay and grinned cunningly.

"Thet all depends, as the 'gator said when asked if he'd have houn' dawg or darky. If them fellers was Missouri law officers, I 'low this must be old Arkansas. If they is Arkansas law officers I'm right sartain this is old Missouri. We sorter figger things thataway down here. I'm Corn Crake. What might your name be?"

"De Croteau. I'm wanted by Missouri officers. Can you show me where I can have shelter for the night, food for myself and horse?"

Crake scratched his matted hair, then informed the other:

"Not more'n three sit-downs and a right smart look straight ahead is the old Gad cabin on Wolf Crick. It's empty, 'cept for ha'nts. I'll show you the way—that is, most of the way. We folks don't hone to go near thet place after sundown."

"It'll be just the place for me," de Croteau bitterly assured him. "I have ghosts in my heart that are worse than all the devils in hell."

Crake eyed him blankly, then believed he understood, nodded sympathetically and said by way of condonation:

"A man's licker will take him thataway sometimes if he ain't well seasoned. I'm so tough inside I put chawing-terbacker 'n' broken glass in mine to give it a whang. I'll mosey along with you—most of the way. 'Ain't hankering to meet no ha'nts. We'll swing off to my cabin, 'n' if the old woman ain't et it all up we'll git a streak of fat 'n' a streak of lean 'n' a pan to sizzle it in."

"I was forgetting," de Croteau put in. "I must have some blankets as well as food. I'll give you some money. You outfit me. I shall want some powder and lead and something to melt the lead in. Pick up what food you can spare. I'll pay well for it. I shall want a shotgun. Also pick me up a rifle if you can—a Spencer or a Winchester."

As he pulled out some money Crake eyed him hungrily and eagerly assured him:

"I'm a ring-tail snorter at wrestling victuals. Know jest where to pick up a likely shotgun. Got powder 'n' lead in my own cabin.

"Them's Colt thirty-sixes you're toting. We go for to tote the navy forty-fours, but every man to his own ch'ice, as the feller said when he et hick'ry bark 'stead of 'possum.

"Them boots are jest right for snakes. We've got a right smart sprinkling of snakes round here."

"And you're not afraid of them?" asked de Croteau, staring down at the bare feet.

"I step over 'em. My woman 'n' me come into this country from Tennessee. We come down the Mississip', aiming for to make the Arkansas River, but drove our dugout into the White when she was backed up by the Spring fresh. We 'lowed we was in the Arkansas, and when we found we was

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in the White we says to let by-gones be by-gones. Care kilt a fat hawg once.

"We made a half-faced camp in these bottoms, then a cabin. Bought a likely-looking nag last crap-time. Got a doller bell and a rifle gun, so we cal'late our sarcumstances is middling.

"Say, Stranger, the Gad place ain't more'n a hoot ahead, and the sun is low. Jest cross the crick and foller up the path. Cal'late the old woman will be wanting me.

"I'll fetch over some bear-bacon and a skillet, but I won't cross the crick after dark. Termorrer, 'bout sunup, I'll fetch some other fixings. I'll throw in some blue ruin that'll grow ha'r on a sea-shell quicker'n the devil can chaw hick'ry bark."

"Never mind about the liquor. I've a notion to try water for a spell. I'll be watching for you. There's pasturage for my horse?"

"Best blue-grass right back the cabin a hoss ever sunk a tooth into."

Crake reluctantly accompanied him a few rods farther until they came in sight of a cabin half-hidden in a walnut growth. It was back from the creek, but what had been a clearing around it was now rank with valley grass and bushes. Even at that distance de Croteau sensed the atmosphere of desolation, and it repelled him. But he must have shelter. He looked about and found that Crake was softly and rapidly retreating. He called after him—

"What became of Gad?"

Crake nervously called back—

"Not to put too strong a p'int on it, old Jim hung hisself to cheat the devil."

With a hysterical laugh de Croteau moved forward to the creek and mused aloud—

"Wonder if it's too far for Roman's ghost to come!"

The next moment he was staring wide-eyed at the cabin. He would have taken oath that he had seen a figure in white glide from the cabin and disappear around the front end of the structure.

"What a fool I am," he growled, renewing his advance and fording the creek. "What do I care for ghosts? Let it be old Gad's ghost or what it may be, I'll stay there tonight."

His reason endeavored to tell him it could not be a supernatural manifestation, although the figure had seemed to float away. Yet he was uneasy as he unsaddled his horse and advanced to peer through the hole that served for a window.

The sunshine lay bright on the hard earthen floor. But what puzzled him and brought a wrinkle to his forehead was the fact that there were no signs of long disuse; no spider-webs, no havoc worked by squirrels and other small furry folks. The floor had been freshly swept.

He entered and passed to the fireplace and held his head over the white ashes. He fancied they were fresh ashes. He thrust his hand among them and found they were warm.

"Well, ghost or devil, I'm here and I'll stay," he recklessly announced.

Outside something rustled among the walnuts. He leaped nervously to the door, keyed up to behold the impossible. It was a cock turkey.

CHAPTER III

NEW ACQUAINTANCES

ELIZA, 'Corn Crake's woman, padded listlessly up the path to the Rodney cabin. She was barefooted and would remain so until persistent frosts routed the Indian Summer.

With a soul starving for miscellaneous information concerning her neighbors she had looked on the newcomers as a great boon and had promptly fastened upon them. Men came and went along the Wolf Creek bottom, men who rode at night and furtively conferred with the rough leaders of the little community. The Rodneys were different and gave the impression that they were on the creek for an indefinite stay.

By patiently laying ambushes, concealed in the midst of much garrulity, Eliza soon learned that the girl Francine was named after her mother, a French woman, and that Jethuel Rodney, the father, was a product of far-off New England. Not much perhaps, yet sufficing nicely for Eliza's imagination to work upon.

Rodney seemed to be a gloomy, dour man, therefore it was remarkable that he should have caught the fancy of the little French lady. Coming from New England, whose nomenclature was supposed to be rough and brusk, it was surprizing that he had consented to name the only child Francine. New England men were supposed to be very masterful with their women, and Eliza

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had never heard of the matrons Hannah Dustin typed. Eliza was positive the girl took her beauty and little graces from her mother's people.

When she endeavored to delve behind these simple facts she encountered solid rock. The girl artlessly turned aside the queries; the father embarrassed the investigator with a forbidding silence. And Eliza was not thin-skinned when bent on adding to her store of gossip.

There was a mystery about the two. They did not care to know their neighbors, and as a result were not popular. They received few visits, but the more they held themselves aloof the more they were discussed. Men who directed the affairs of the scattered community talked them over. Some of the women folks declared the girl "put on airs."

The mystery consisted in Rodney's reticence to proclaim the reason for being in hiding; for none doubted his being a fugitive. A frank confession would have won him a neighborly sympathy. Unless one be outside the law there was scant reason for his coming to Wolf Creek.

The dubious geographical position of the region enhanced its advantages as a haven. It could be Arkansas, and had been for those fleeing from Missouri. With similar logic one could contend—reinforced by his neighbors—that it was Missouri should an Arkansas posse venture into the bottoms.

The only virtue possessed by the creek, where it flowed midway between the Crake and Rodney cabins, was its worth as a sanctuary for the hunted.

It naturally followed that the few inhabitants who were not "wanted" by justice were strongly in sympathy with those who were. By simple deduction Eliza arrived at the conclusion that Rodney was "wanted."

His selection of the bottoms in preference to the rough north country evidenced the man's native shrewdness. Eliza had heard a man in Tennessee say that New Englanders were a caution for shrewdness. She always associated that quality with the knack of taking an unfair advantage. Therefore Rodney must be an underhanded sort of a man.

Other neighbors desisted from calling after one or two rebuffs. But Eliza was tenacious. Life was rather monotonous on Wolf Creek, especially for the women folks.

The men had more relaxation. They were gone of nights, sometimes to the hill country, sometimes across the nebulous border. Men who ordinarily would see no hard money from one year to another often showed up with a new horse, or rifle gun, or a bolt of gay cloth for their women. But to stay at home and wait, wondering if the horse would gallop home riderless or with the man fetching a store-gift, marked the limit of a woman's mental disturbances.

What Eliza sadly missed, without quite understanding just what she did miss, was the pleasing medium between a stolid animal existence and those tense moments of dumb fear when her man was late. She had hoped that the newcomers would supply this want. She was hungry to learn all about Francine's relatives, whom they married, how much family, their ages and the like. Give her that information and she had new furnishings for her every-day thoughts.

This day, as on other days, she was like a prospector, long baffled in the search for precious metals. She forgot the disappointments of the yesterdays and thrilled with the hope of striking it rich.

Somehow she was unusually positive that luck was with her as she slowly advanced up the path, ostentatiously carrying a broken china mug. The mug to her was the same as a road-belt to an Indian crossing alien country. It symbolized the nature of her errand and gave her an open road.

She seldom came without borrowing something. The excuse usually permitted her to enter the cabin.

Her snuff-colored face was drawn down lugubriously, a bid for the girl's sympathy, but she could not suppress the new sparkle in her light-gray eyes. She had news to impart, rather to trade. She came not to beg, but to barter.

FRANCINE was seated on the little porch, half-concealed by the morning-glory vines, and seemingly interested in watching a yellow horse-guard pursue a geeenhead, or prairie fly, that had wandered from the pasture-land. Eliza coughed dolefully.

"Good morning, Eliza," Francine kindly greeted.

With her best exemplification of low spirits and physical fatigue Eliza sank down on the edge of the porch and stared gloomily at the broken mug.

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"I'm right glad, Miss Francy, if you can find it a good mornin'," she sighed. "I was 'lowin' you might have a bit of sweet-'nin' I could borrer till my man gits over Gainesville way."

For a moment Francine looked dubious, then smiled good-naturedly and nodded, saying:

"I'll divide with you, Eliza. Your mug will just about hold half of what I have."

"Well, the Lawd's will be done," said Eliza, bowing her head to hide the triumphant gleam in her eyes.

With her presence accounted for she put the mug one side and clasped her hands between her knees.

"You're not in a hurry to get back, are you, Eliza? If not we can talk a bit. Then I'll get the sweetening."

Eliza's thin chest grew warm with exultation. Corn Crake might believe his rifle gun was 'witched, but her own luck was unimpaired. But she was careful not to exhibit her joy.

"Not in a mortal hurry, Miss Francy. But with Corn back home I don't feel free to go trapezin' round much. Corn's a great hand to git r'iled if another man as much as squints a eye at me. Wish he wa'n't so dratted 'fraid I'd be tooken with another. I'm a honest woman, an' I've stood by him when he had to hide so long that his ha'r got as thick an' tousled as a b'ar's. How many sisters did you say your pap has?"

"He was the only child," replied Francine, speaking absent-mindedly. Not much, yet well worth while to clear up.

Eliza had intended to withhold her major offensive, but the news was too important to keep, and perhaps if she gave it freely the girl would be jolted into satisfactory responsiveness. Without any further preamble Eliza announced—

"There's a squatter over'n the old Gad cabin."

The effect on the girl was not so pronounced as Eliza had anticipated. Francine simply remarked—

"Why, I thought that cabin was haunted."

"I 'low this new squatter ain't much better'n a ha'nt," said Eliza grimly. "When a man goes to livin' with a ha'nt it shows he's done something so bad he ain't skeered of the devil.

"He's got money, too. Lots of it. Some of it's hard money. He's hidin'. He's bedeviled my man into waitin' on him.

"Sich doin's! Prob'ly comes across the line with a Arkansas sheriff hot-foot ahind him. Mebbe he come from Texas, or Injun Territory. Wouldn't be a heap s'prized if he come from Lou'siana.

"I've had several peeks at him. He's been up to our door a-askin' for Corn once. He don't dress like our men do. But land sakes! Corn would be a han'some man if he could git a proper outfit. Lawd, but wasn't that critter han'some when I married him! All the gals jest crazy over him! Why, when he's got his whiskers shaved off smooth he's as purty as a fresh-scraped hawg. All pink 'n' white. Where's your pap?"

"Up in the hills somewhere. He says there's coal up there."

The girl's face clouded over.

Eliza cocked an eye knowingly at the broken mug. The trail was warm. She remarked:

"Well, one blessin' is that no one from Arkansas can pounce down on him here. Our men keep a right smart watch along the line—wherever it may be. Miss Francy, you ever see a ha'nt?"

Francine shook her head and smiled. Eliza glanced about uneasily as the soft south wind whispered something to the morning-glory vines, and confided:

"Wouldn't want your pap to hear me—he's that upsettish in his way of growlin' at a body with his eyes. But the ha'nt of old Gad's been seen at the cabin. There!"

"Nonsense, Eliza——"

"True's Gawd's book! He come back to see where he hung hisself."

"That's very foolish talk, Eliza."

"Oh, Miss Francy! Don't fetch a judgment down on you by talkin' like that! The Lawd will watch over us, but don't r'ile the devil. The stranger that's squattin' there seen the ha'nt. Seen it plain's daylight. It had a long tail like a painter, an' green eyes. Next mornin' some of my tame ducks was missin'."

Francine threw back her head and laughed. Eliza had never imagined her as laughing. A mocking-bird would have stayed his flight to listen and copy. Eliza was displeased.

"I'm a-tellin' you what's true's the Gospel, an' it ain't no laffin' matter," said Eliza.

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"But a ghost wouldn't steal your ducks. Ghosts aren't supposed to eat."

"A ha'nt would 'a' took 'em if he wanted fresh blood," muttered Eliza, still offended by the girl's reception of her news. " 'Low I'll be moseyin' if you'll kindly look up that there sweet'nin'."

"I never thought of his wanting blood," soothed Francine, inwardly shuddering.

Then with a sharp edge to her voice she demanded—

"Has that man Baker gone yet?"

Eliza was worried by the question. She assumed a confidence she did not feel in replying:

"Now, Miss Francy, don't you go for to fret 'bout Buckshot Baker. Corn Crake's back home. The corn's laid by. The ven'son's dryin'. The bear bacon's bein' cured. An' Corn's found some likely bee-timber; so I 'low we'll have plenty of sweet'nin' bime-by without goin' to Gainesville, an' I'll fetch you a right smart helpin' out the first lot.

"An' Corn's feelin' high 'n' mighty. Why, if he hadn't been wanted by a Tennessee sheriff when the war busted loose I 'low he'd 'a' fit the whole North single-handed. He's good as said so hisself.

"He ain't a man to be put on, Miss Francy. He won't give a lie or take one. He'll climb anything on two legs or four that r'iles him. Thank the Lawd I can still manage him. But if he ever gits after Buckshot Baker he'll chaw him quicker'n our old dawg can tree a coon. An' I'm goin' to tell him you don't hone to have that Baker a-comin' here."

"No, no, Eliza. Say nothing—just yet. I mustn't make any trouble," hastily discouraged Francine.

And perhaps she had her doubts as to Corn Crake's fighting spirit.

"When it comes to trouble Corn's a whole team of b'ar-dawgs," proudly insisted Eliza.

"It was his fightin' ways at the quarter-races that got him into trouble in Tennessee. You ain't seen Corn at his best, when he has a snort of blue ruin under his belt an' a knife in his paw. Lawd, but he was han'some when we was married. Why, if we'd had our rights we'd now be livin' back on Little Moccasin Bend with real glass in the winders."

"I don't want any fighting," protested the girl. "I hope your troubles will all smooth out so you can go back some day."

SELDOM had Eliza known the sweet boon of sympathy. She began to weep, distressing the girl much, and between her sobs managed to say:

"I dunno! I dunno! Things look sorter black for us. Black Dawley sneaked over to Gainesville to git some powder an' lead, an' he says there's a letter there for 'Cornwallis' Crake, with a lawyer's name in the corner. It don't look good to Corn. He don't hone to meet up with any law people.

"I tried to tell him it ain't for him. No one ever called him 'Cornwallis.' His name's jest plain Corn. The writin' can't be for him. But he dug out to the hills an' laid low till Dawley remembered the letter was marked as comin' from Polk County while we come from Little Moccasin Bend in Hawkins County, provin' it couldn't be for him. I got that word to him an' he come in.

"Lawd, but wa'n't he tearin' mad when he got home! He jest 'lowed that if any one ever tried to give him a law letter he'd take a under-bite out of his ear an' scoot for it ag'in. But the letter give me a damp. I'm 'lowin' we won't ever git back to Moccasin Bend.

"But I must be moseyin'. When it ain't the shuttle it's the spinning-wheel. Lawd, but you oughter 'a' seen Corn in his new jeans goin' to the quarter-race to ride his own nag for the jockey-purse! I've made him a new outfit every year since we've been out here, so's he can dress like a gen'leman when we go back; which we won't never do, I 'low."

Francine took the mug and filled it as high as the fracture would permit, and promised to return the call and talk with the children. Then she resumed her position on the porch while the slatternly figure moved down the path.

"Every one is hiding from some one," the girl bitterly mused. "We're hiding. The stranger in the Gad cabin is hiding. Baker is hiding. The stranger will join Bender's band, and there'll be more riding across the border at night, more bloodshed and robberies. And Baker is the worst of them all."

She wished she were with her father. She wished the cabin were thoroughly isolated away from human habitations. And of all the lawless characters they must occasionally come in contact with, the man Baker caused her the most alarm.

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At last she rose to enter the cabin and make a pretense of preparing the midday meal when the appearance of a man down the path caused her to halt and lean against the porch post. With a deep sigh of relief she observed that the man was a stranger. She had feared he was Baker.

The man seemed irresolute in approaching the cabin. Then he came to a decision and advanced with quick, nervous steps which were entirely different from Corn Crake's lounging gait or Buckshot Baker's insolent swagger. She also noted that he was dressed much as the young men of family and substance in Little Rock dressed, although his apparel looked to be travel-worn.

She watched him in silence as he swung from the path toward the porch. He halted within a dozen feet of her and removed his hat and bowed low.

She made no move to return his greeting. He began to explain:

"My name is de Croteau. I am staying at the old Gad cabin. I found this book in the cabin. From the name on the fly-leaf, coupled with inquiries made of one called Crake, I assume it belongs to you. Am I right in addressing you as Miss Francine Rodney?"

"I am Francine Rodney. It is my book. I thank you for returning it."

As he stepped to the porch and handed over the slim volume she saw that his face was haggard and his eyes uneasy. With an attempt at lightness he informed her:

"I owe you for a fright. I thought at first you were a ghost when you ran from the cabin."

"I used to go there when I wished to be perfectly alone," she explained, her level gaze never leaving his somber face.

"And my coming has deprived you of your sanctuary!" he exclaimed. "I'll move out at once. The cabin shall be returned to you before sunset."

"Please don't. That would be absurd. I shall not go there again even if the cabin were empty."

She did not invite him to be seated, and he made no move to invade the porch.

"One ruined shack is as good as another for me," he muttered.

He bitterly added—

"And they all have their ghosts."

Her gaze became touched with curiosity. His speech, his lack of control, told her he was younger than she had first thought. He seemed to lack an interest in her, and this indifference was refreshing. Before she could scarcely realize it she was saying—"Won't you be seated?"

His thoughts were on Jessie Lascar. This young woman was impersonal. If he were speaking with a man he would have felt no differently. He feared his mind would give way when he thought of the girl he had lost. Nor did he want to tell his troubles and receive sympathy. He wished to be alone.

He bowed and backed away from the porch, and surprized her by replying:

"I must be going. I knew you would want your book. Books must be scarce in this lonely region. I would have sent it over by Crake, but I'm afraid he's irresponsible at times."

And because he was ready to go she was willing that he should tarry for a bit.

"I have a few volumes with me," she said. "We could not—bother—to bring more. They have to make up for the loss of acquaintances. It's very lonely here."

HE PAUSED, politely heard her finish, then bowed again and turned away. She would not have essayed again to detain him if not for the sight of a second figure entering the path. This newcomer swaggered and struck at the ripe fruits of the sumac with a cane.

On beholding de Croteau with the girl he thrust the cane under his arm and walked more briskly. "Don't go, please," Francine surprized de Croteau by nervously requesting. "That man down the path—" She stopped in confusion.

"Isn't welcome?" listlessly asked de Croteau, turning to stare at the approaching figure.

Then with contempt in his voice—

"I shouldn't think it would be difficult to send him about his business."

His disdain increased as the man drew nearer and his slight physique was more noticeable. He was below medium height, and the face was thin and the features sharp.

As he came to halt and stared at the two of them de Croteau further discovered that the eyes were peculiar in that the pupils were feline in appearance. The aquiline nose bespoke of an overriding nature. The hair, which hung well down on the shoulders, was a washed-out corn color, but of

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fine texture like a woman's. De Croteau caught himself wondering if the fellow was not vain of it.

But what brought de Croteau's brows down in a frown was the cane the man carried. There was no mistaking it; it was a sword cane.

"Miss Francine, I make you my compliments," he saluted with a low bow that contained an exaggeration of courtesy.

The voice was well modulated, and it was plain the fellow was educated, if not cultured.

"Mr. Baker, this is Mr. de Croteau, a stranger in these parts," said the girl.

The two bowed and resumed eying each other with thinly veiled hostility. De Croteau was mildly interested in knowing that he was beholding Buckshot Baker, whose notorious history had been related by Corn Crake. What Crake had failed to tell, de Croteau, now that he had seen the man, believed he could supply for himself.

Baker was a product of the war's aftermath. Reared to a position of wealth, he had lived idly as had many a son of a slaveholder. He had traveled, and he knew his books. He had wasted his years in vicious pleasures.

With the old order ended he had found himself impoverished and, as he believed, incapable of earning his keep. Money he must have to cater to his evil habits. Unable to detect a fortune within the law, he had lost no time in placing himself outside the law.

The night-riding of the Ku Klux Klan had afforded him an excellent opportunity to replenish his purse until he was cut off from his mates while visiting in northern Arkansas. The State troops had him hemmed in, and only by luck, a moonless night, and much reckless riding did he escape to Wolf Creek.

"A stranger to these parts, Mr. de Croteau, Miss Francine says," observed Baker.

"I have been here not quite a week."

"Like the rest of us you're in hiding, I take it."

"I was pursued here by a sheriff and his deputy," de Croteau admitted.

"So Crake told me. It's a good way to come—here. Did you bring the swag with you?"

De Croteau flushed, and coldly corrected the other:

"Thank God I am not down to that depth yet. I am wanted for killing a man."

Francine gave a little involuntary cry. Baker laughed with genuine relish, and his gaze lost some of its venom.

"Curse me, but you're refreshing," he cried. "I admire the fine distinction you make between a thief and a murderer. I approve of it. I endorse——"

"I am no murderer," growled de Croteau. "You assume too fast."

"They never are," airily replied Baker. "Of course you're not. Banish the thought! You simply killed him. Well, so long as he is dead, he's dead.

"This is an excellent country to hide in. We're all striped with the same brush—always excepting Miss Francine's father, of course. We're all free to confess our little shortcomings. In truth, I almost regret that Mr. Rodney has none to confess.

"It's come to such a pass that Wolf Creek is suspicious of an honest man. Ha, ha! Back in your home, Mr. de Croteau, wherever it may be, the passport into society was a family name, political power or gold. On Wolf Creek it's more ideal. We're judged and respected for our indecencies. Ha, ha! Not bad, eh? And it's as the world was intended to be. Might is right on Wolf Creek."

"That's all wicked nonsense," upbraided Francine.

"Ah, a woman's prejudice. Her father must be an honest man. All the more mystery why he came here," lightly cried Baker. "I insist my argument is without a weakness. What standing would I have in this region if I had not been a very successful thief?

"If I were an honest man would Knife Bender take me high in his confidence? Why, Miss Francine, you must know from gossip that he would cut my throat for a chance at my pockets.

"And how long would your father be free to come and go if I did not call a halt on the pack? You can thank my disregard of man-made laws to your father's being left unmolested, Miss Francine. You two were as helpless as a pair of rabbits when you came here. But I told the gang to wait. The gang heard and heeded."

And Baker drew himself up to his full height and expanded his chest. With a sardonic side-glance at de Croteau he added—

"They feared me and they waited."

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"Having killed a man, I suppose I won't need a champion," sneered de Croteau.

"We shall see what we're to see in your case, Mr. de Croteau," softly retorted Baker.

Then to the girl—and there was no lightness in his voice now—he said:

"Now I come to my errand here. Your father is away from home. He should not wander from this cabin without permission from Bender or from me.

"Over on Devil Knob the men are talking about him. They are impatient. Some are in an ugly mood. I have held them back from bothering you. I believe I can hold them back a bit longer. But they're human, Miss Francine.

"This country affords you and your father a resting-place. Bender's influence keeps nosey officers away. Naturally he feels irritated at not having his patronage and protection acknowledged. When your father returns he must go to the Knob and meet the men and fix things up."

"I'll tell him," she said in a low voice.

"Then I've finished my errand here—for today. You are walking my way, I believe."

The last to de Croteau. The girl was turning to enter the cabin, her head drooping. De Croteau nodded sullenly and fell in beside his new acquaintance.

They walked in silence until out of sight of the cabin. Then de Croteau asked—

"What will your gang do with Rodney?"

"Make him divide up his swag," was the prompt response.

"You think he is a fugitive from justice?"

Baker laughed heartily.

"My young stranger, why should he come to this lonely spot and bring his beautiful daughter with him if more settled regions were open to him? I don't know just what he's done, but he's done something. He must pay up."

"His daughter can't have done anything."

"Think I'm idiot enough to think she has? Loyalty to her father brings her here. The more risk she runs, the more sacrifices she makes, the deeper and truer her loyalty."

"—— it, sir, I don't like your talk," said de Croteau, halting. "Your words sound like a snake slipping along under the dead swamp-grass."

"You're finicky. You'll get over that," said Baker, in no wise displeased at de Croteau's frankness. "I have killed and I have robbed, but I still speak what's in my mind. When I've killed I've always taken every advantage. I hold it to be a falsehood to do otherwise, an empty pretense at compromise with what fools call conscience. If you're going to get a man use common sense. Be honest about it. Take every advantage—like this!"

And as he spoke he whipped the sword from the cane and presented the point to within a foot of de Croteau's chest.

THE two remained rigid, staring at each other. Then with a wild laugh Baker sheathed the blade, explaining:

"Just an example of how I go about it when I'm in earnest. Merely an example."

"I understood it to be a bit of playfulness," said de Croteau evenly; and he removed his hand from his trousers pocket and revealed a small derringer he had been holding. The weapon was cocked.

"I had my big gun out of sight so as not to alarm Miss Rodney. This small affai I bought of Crake. A relic of some raid o robbery, I fancy. Quite capable of doin mischief, I suppose."

Baker glared round-eyed at the derringer then shifted his gaze to the calm face of de Croteau. Then he showed his teeth in a smile. His yellowish eyes closed and he shook with silent laughter.

"I'm laughing at myself," he finally explained. "To think I took you for a softy and tried to show off before you! I confess it. I'm honest.

"De Croteau, I'm afraid I'm beginning to like you. It's devilish awkward to like a man. One can't be happy if he takes over another's troubles. And if you like a man you must share his troubles. It's foolish.

"Always be selfish. You may not please your mates, but you'll please yourself. I'm afraid I like you, but I'm positive I shall never pull my steel again when you're looking."

"Don't put yourself out to like me," mumbled de Croteau. "I'm leaving you here."

"Abrupt, but honest. I never quarrel with honesty. In the old Gad place, I believe. Being a stranger you knew no better, of course; but Crake should have told you how to go about securing shelter.

"The Rodneys made the same mistake. They should have asked Bender's permission. You should have done the same.

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Better to sleep outdoors in the snow than to get on Knife Bender's bad books. I hope to make it all right with him concerning the Rodneys. I think I can fix it for you."

"You needn't bother to fix up anything for me. If this man Bender owns the cabin and won't let me hire it I'll find another, or build a shack. And if he doesn't own it he can go to —— for all I care."

"Oh, oh, oh! My dear de Croteau! I can never take that message to Knife Bender. Not after the sweet way you called my hand with the derringer. Later on I'll take you to the Knob to meet Knife and the boys."

"I don't care to meet any of them."

"That's beside the point. You don't fully understand the situation yet. When you've learned a few things you'll feel different.

"Only one or two men stay at the Knob all the time. The others have their homes, like Crake. They put in their crops, and much of the time are model husbandmen.

"You'll find Knife all right if you keep off his toes. And by the way it's poor policy for you to make yourself at home at the Rodney cabin until you get better acquainted in these parts.

"Yes, that's a threat. Your eyes asked if it was. I'm honest. But it's mighty good advice."

"I'll remember that you gave it," returned de Croteau. "Good-by."

CHAPTER IV

DE CROTEAU IS INTERVIEWED

FROM somewhere Crake managed to secure various necessities for the Gad cabin. De Croteau was a liberal paymaster, and what could not be found at one cabin was purchased through Crake at another. De Croteau spent several evenings running bullets for his two big Colt revolvers and in loading paper cartridges.

Crake would have none of the place once the shadows began to gather under the walnuts. But when the sun was high he loafed much about the cabin, and from him de Croteau learned of the scattered settlers.

There was a sawmill on Lick Creek run by men who were on good terms with the law. Bender's gang did not bother them as at times there was need for milled timber. The band's headquarters, said Crake, was some five miles north of the Gad place on Devil Knob. From Crake's effort at description de Croteau pictured this rendezvous as being in the heart of a wild, broken country seldom visited except by some member of the band.

Just at present, said Crake, Bender and his men were very busy across the line, reaping what they feared would be their last harvest in Arkansas; for even men of small mental caliber believed that the State authorities would ultimately overcome those who rode by night in efforts to establish their "invisible empire."

Until the Ku Klux Dens were broken up, however, it was a simple matter for the men from Devil Knob to array themselves and their horses in black calico trappings, bespangled with glittering metallic designs, and then to sweep down on the isolated Arkansas homes and settlements and rob—kill if necessary—and flee back to the Knob and divide their gains while the K.K.K. was receiving all the blame. There were other bands, operating from Texas, Louisiana and Indian Territory, who likewise stole and murdered under cover of the Ku Klux cabalistic insignia.

Crake was very indignant in speaking of the southern bands. It was plain that he considered their activities in the light of poaching on Knife Bender's private preserves.

He told de Croteau about many lawless acts, and in doing so had the manner of one who discusses some legitimate industry. It was the heyday of crime, and Bender was determined to make the most of his opportunities.

Crake spoke with the garrulous freedom of a child. He had seen de Croteau pursued and fired upon by officers of the law. He considered the fugitive's credentials to be above question. That de Croteau would soon ride behind Bender he never had a doubt.

Two days after his visit to the Rodney cabin de Croteau saddled Red Shot and rode over to the Crake place to learn if a shotgun had been procured for him. Wild turkeys, ducks and grouse were very plentiful, while deer, elk and bear were to be had for a little patience.

De Croteau was eager to hunt, hoping to find peace of mind in arduous travel. He dreaded the nights when his thoughts would revert to his parents and Jessie Lascar.

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His arrival at the cabin was greeted by the baying of dogs and the shrill cries of three tow-headed children. Mrs. Crake came to the door, a long muzzle-loading rifle in one hand. She gave the impression of being capable of defending her own in the absence of her husband.

De Croteau had been to the cabin before, and Eliza smiled warmly on recognizing him. Corn had told her marvelous stories about the young man's wealth.

"Well, I never!" she exclaimed, setting the rifle inside the door. "Didn't know but what 'twas that shiftless Black Dawley. He's on spree ag'in, an' his licker makes him bumptious at times. Good man to heart, but a body never can tell what notion he'll take when filled up with blue ruin.

"You jest come in an' squat till I can make a pone of bread an' sit you out a snack to eat. Corn ain't here yet, he's that busy ramshacklin' round. But I've got some cold bacon an' cabbage an' buttermilk; an' with a hot pone of bread——"

"I thank you, Mrs. Crake, but I've just eaten. Thought I'd call and see if your husband has found a shotgun for me."

"There, now! Ain't it sinful! Not to put too strong a p'int on it, he ain't; but he 'lows too afore the moon fulls. Spent his whole mornin' a-killin' snakes down at the swampy places. Goodness knows what good that does us. We can't eat 'em. You, Buster, you keep shet."

The last to a vociferous dog. Then admiringly:

"Them's the best team of b'ar dawgs in all Missouri or Arkansas—whenever we find which's t'other. When we first come here they was a caution at previdin'. Git a ba'r an' other game any time. They'd drive it right into the cabin, almost. We didn't have no bread in them days, but by mixin' b'ar meat an' ven'son an' puttin' in a sprinkle of turkey breast we fetched along fair to middlin'. Sure you won't squat an' have a snack?"

"Thank you, but I'll sit here in the sun and wait a bit for Corn. The Rodneys are newcomers, Corn tells me."

"They be, an' they're real likely folks; that is, 'ceptin' the old man. He's pokin' round in the hills most the time. Miss Francy says he's huntin' for coal. La suds! Coal! He'd better be turnin' hawgs out to fat up on the mast an' then feed 'em a little corn to harden the meat. That's better winter chawin' than any coal."

"I was at their cabin two days ago. Met a Mr. Baker there."

ELIZA'S sallow face became empty of expression. She gave a sidelong glance at the children. De Croteau pulled out a few coins and hurled them down the path. As the youngsters scampered after the silver Eliza whispered:

"That Buckshot Baker's a hard man. Got his name from his knack of using a shotgun filled with buckshot. They do tell some mortal strong stories 'bout him. I tell Corn every mornin' not to cross him. Corn's that peppery an' man-eaterish that he'd comb the devil if he took the notion.

"If Corn hadn't been so partial to blue ruin on quarter-race day I might had a nigger doin' the house chores now. But I've warned him to keep his tongue off'n Baker. If they ever have trouble one or t'other of 'em will bleed to death in his boots. An' jest as soon as Corn gits the charm took off'n his rifle gun he'll be harder to manage.

"You see, some one 'witched old 'Liza—meanin' his rifle, not me. He named it after me. Yes, sir! Mister, some one put a charm on that rifle, an' he fired twice at a deer yesterday an' missed a shot my little Madison County Crake could 'a' made."

Later de Croteau learned the towheads were loyally named after counties in Tennessee.

"I reckoned that Rodney girl must be lonesome," he remarked, wishing to bring the conversation back to Francine.

"Miss Francy's notional like all us women," sighed Eliza. "When you 'low she's lonely she'll fair drive you away to be more so. Buckshot Baker's the only one that goes there like he was populatious. Don't know how he an' the old man will saw it off together. Old Rodney looks grim's a old he wolf. But he don't want to cross Buckshot Baker's trail. La suds! I'd rather have Knife Bender after me then that same little sawn-off runt of a Baker."

"This man Bender. What does he look like? I've never seen him."

She hesitated, but it was sweet to talk to new ears.

"Bender is boss round here," she began. "He's queer. Queer to look at, queer to draw a bead on. You, Polk County Crake,

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take your brothers down to the swampy place an' see if your pap's trap has caught anything.

"Bender ain't chuck full of l'arnin' like Baker. Our men's cur'ous to see which comes out on top. Neither one will play second fiddle to t'other very long. But Bender is the boss. He don't sleep at the Knob any. Has a cabin hid away somewhere. Our men have orders to keep clear of his cabin.

"He's awful with a knife. He can heave one like a rifle gun throws a hunk of lead. Even my Corn wouldn't want to cross him. An' what that man Corn won't climb when he's right smart mad would skeer the devil, I 'low."

"I suppose he calls at the Rodney cabin," prompted de Croteau as she displayed symptoms of running.

"Sho! Him call on a woman?" she cried in derision. "Why he's that mortal shy of women he won't even come here. Mebbe he 'low his figger ain't noble 'nough to catch a woman's eye. I dunno. But he never was seen near the Rodney place."

"Tell your husband to fetch over the shotgun and some buckshot as soon as he finds a good one. And I'm still keen about a rifle. He has the money for them and I'll be glad to pay for all his trouble."

"Land of sorrer! But you've been payin' him right smart, mister. I'll prod him up a trifle. Seems like you was made of money.

"Well, lack day! If Corn could 'a' kept clear of whisky, tar-kilns an' quarter-races we might be buying a right smart sprinkle of new guns. But praise the Lawd we all have our troubles, an' I'll sing glory hallelujah if Corn'll keep off the rampage.

"You ain't seen Miss Francy's pap yet? Course you couldn't, with him bein' up in the hills huntin' for coal. Ho! ho! That's the dad-fetchin'est thing I ever hear tell. Winter comin' on an' him not havin' a smell of b'ar bacon in his cabin.

"But Miss Francy is smart. She's comin' over here some day to see if she can knock some letters into little Hawkins County's head. Corn's ag'in' the notion. He never could read or write, an' he's got along all right. I can read if I ain't crowded, but it never done me no good.

"Corn 'lows if the Lawd wanted us to read we'd 'a' been borned that way. Still if tryin' will make her happy I'm notional 'nough to let her; that is, so long as Hawkins County can stand it. I don't believe in puttin' a strain on any child's head."

De Croteau took his leave. Half-way down the creek path he met the "team" of bear-dogs and the three young Crakes. One of these was proudly swinging a river rat by the tail.

Red Shot was held down to a sober walk as his master had no definite purpose. De Croteau was inclined to call at the Rodney cabin, but Eliza had described the girl as one who wished to be alone.

He smiled grimly on recalling Baker's warning to keep away from Miss Francine, but he could not take Baker seriously. There were phases of the man that interested him, especially his brutal frankness in declaring his own evil. Men usually do evil for gain or revenge; Baker loved evil for its own sake. The type was quite new to de Croteau.

When near the creek he loathed the thought of returning to the Gad place, and having nowhere else to go, he proceeded to kill time by dismounting and sprawling out on the ground.

THE squirrels became used to his motionless figure and renewed their activities in the thicket close by and even ventured out in the open close to his feet in the excitement of their play. Birds balanced on the branches overhead and clamorously announced the discovery of an owl half-hidden in a hollow of the tree-trunk. An hour or two passed with the man almost as oblivious of the wild life as fur and feathers were indifferent to his presence.

He was aroused from his abstraction by Red Shot's behavior. The horse was standing with head up and ears pricked forward. Lazily rolling on his side, de Croteau caught a glimpse of a man stealing through the bushes toward the Crake cabin. Believing it to be Crake and preferring to give his instructions about the shotgun in person rather than to trust to Eliza's runaway tongue, he rose and climbed into the saddle and slowly rode back over the path.

He heard the dogs barking before he came in sight of the cabin. He also heard excited cries from the children. Then came the scream of a woman.

He reined in, loath to be a witness of a family quarrel. Despite Eliza's high praise of her man's fighting abilities de Croteau surmised that in a major engagement she

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would more than hold her own. Then came another scream; and this time there was no mistaking the deadly fear in the woman's heart.

With an oath de Croteau shook the reins and the horse took the rest of the path and came into the opening before the cabin at a smashing pace. The door of the cabin was closed and the dogs were jumping against it and making a great racket, while Madison County Crake and his two brothers were bombarding the portal with stones.

De Croteau halted and might have turned back had not the woman cried:

"Don't! Don't!"

Again there was the note of extreme fear. He spoke to Red Shot, and the eager animal raced for the cabin. De Croteau assumed that Crake had returned home under the influence of whisky and was beating his wife.

Without bothering to try the door he rode to one of the small windows, set high under the eaves, and without dismounting brushed aside the cheap curtain and thrust in his head. He beheld a striking tableau.

The woman was crouching in a corner with a rough table before her and was attempting to use the long muzzle-loading rifle as a club. Opposite her stood a thick-set man, whose heavy black beard and long hair glistened with bear-oil. He held a butcher-knife and was cautiously maneuvering to get across the table and inside the vicious half-circle described by the butt of the rifle.

"I come for blue ruin, ye scut, an' I'll have it or slit yer weazand," the stranger was hoarsely bellowing.

"I tell you, Black Dawley, there ain't a drap of whisky in this cabin!" cried the frightened woman; and as she spoke she landed a blow on the outstretched, hairy arm.

With an oath Dawley seized the gun by the barrel and began drawing the woman to him. Thinking only to maintain her hold on the weapon, the woman screamed and permitted herself to be slowly dragged on to the table. Dawley grinned ferociously and pulled with one hand, the other holding the knife above his head.

De Croteau pushed a revolver through the window, and as the sun glinted on the blade fired. With a yell of terror and pain Dawley leaped back and caressed his benumbed hand and wrist.

"You, Dawley, stand clear while Mrs. Crake comes out," ordered de Croteau, recocking his gun.

With a sobbing cry the frightened woman edged along the wall, passing under the window and to the door. Dawley ceased his foul mouthings and gaped in amazement at the strange face lowering down on him.

Then Eliza was crowding against Red Shot and pawing at de Croteau's arm and shrieking:

"Sent from Heaven! He barred the door! He said he'd kill me if I didn't give him a snort of whisky. Oh, jest wait till Corn Crake gits his hooks into him!"

Black Dawley recovered some of his composure and the woman's reference to her husband's anger caused him to grin in derision. His small eyes grew murderous as they glared up into de Croteau's face.

"Now you come out," ordered de Croteau.

Dawley picked up his knife and swore violently on beholding the damage inflicted by the heavy ball. He was bent far forward as he made for the door. De Croteau replaced his revolver and jumped to the ground.

As Dawley emerged, his long arms swinging below his knees like an ape's, Eliza cried:

"Gun in his boot! Look out!"

Dawley made a dive for the top of his boot, and at the same moment de Croteau seemed to straighten in mid-air, his fist catching the ruffian under the chin and sending him on his back.

"Get up, and keep your hands away from that gun," warned de Croteau.

Dawley crawled to his feet and hoarsely asked—

"What d'ye mean by comin' round here an' firin' off guns through people's winders at honest men?"

"I mean to teach a dog a lesson," growled de Croteau; and again his fist shot out and caused Dawley to stand on his neck and shoulders.

"Now get on your feet and show your back," he added.

"Jerusalem's golden shore! But you're right smart strong!" gasped Eliza.

Dawley staggered to his feet and made for the creek path. On reaching a clump of cedars he howled some foul threats, and, drawing a gun from his boot, fired on de Croteau. The lead went wild. De Croteau returned the fire a second after the man dived from view.

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He would have mounted and given pursuit but the crashing of the underbrush testified to Dawley's final withdrawal. He paused to say:

"Mrs. Crake, you had the long rifle. Why didn't you use it?"

"I busted a cap on him. The dad-fetched thing wouldn't go off," she whimpered. "You, Polk County Crake, stop that howlin' an' drive them dawgs under the cabin. Mister, I'm obleeged to you. Eliza Crake don't forget them that's friendly.

"Don't say nothin' to Corn 'bout it. I'll try to keep the children shet. He'd kill Dawley an' then the gang would kill him. Corn's that tempery he'd go shootin' an' a slashin' right through the whole b'ilin' of 'em.

"An' when you meet Dawley ag'in look out his hands don't sag into his boots. He's plumb bad when he's drunk. Wouldn't happen in a coon's age that he'd call an' not find a snort of ruin an' be welcome. But Corn jest finished the last an' ain't fetched home no more.

"When Dawley's sober he's real good comp'ny. Make you jest die a-laffin' at his foolishness. Lawd of Israel! But he did have me skeered for a bit!"

DE CROTEAU mounted, and this time he made straight for his cabin. But it was not the encounter with Dawley which filled his thoughts as he sat in the sun on the doorstep. Jessie Lascar's face came and went, and was always filled with horror. In vain he endeavored to picture it as it was before his tragic duel with Roman.

In defense of his peace of mind he tried to concentrate on Francine Rodney, and for the first time was calm enough to wonder at her presence on Wolf Creek. Who and what was her father? What had he done that made it necessary for him to seek refuge at the foot of the Ozarks' southern slope? And what brand of idiocy permitted him to bring his daughter along?

Regardless of his offense, the girl would have been safe in any Arkansas settlement. And he had brought her here, where a sheriff's writ did not seem to run unless backed up by a strong posse, where the lonely hills afforded an ideal refuge for the lawless, where every scattered cabin along the border held a spy for men of Knife Bender's stamp, where even an honest homemaker would not dare whisper a word against the vicious element.

The creek was rightly named, thought de Croteau. The only law that obtained there seemed to be the law of the wolf-pack.

But it was illogical for him to quarrel with the lack of law. Were conditions otherwise Bushrod Williams and his deputy would never have turned back when Crake fired on them from ambush.

And there was Buckshot Baker. In a normal environment he could never have entered the girl's life. In wolf land he took a malicious pleasure in boasting of his wickedness.

In truth Francine seemed to be the only incongruous element along the creek. It required no great imagination to picture Baker as a menace to the girl.

Thus far she had suffered only from his bold talk, and her father had been at liberty to roam the country. But how long before annoyance would be succeeded by brutality? Fellowship might be accorded to the lawless stranger, yet the newcomer must not be too tardy in establishing an unsavory status.

De Croteau had been on the creek long enough to know that the Rodneys were in a trap, prisoners while seemingly free, and that Rodney must soon meet Bender and explain various things. De Croteau's confession that he had killed a man, substantiated by the pursuit by Bushrod Williams, furnished him the best of credentials. Yet even he could not expect to have it end there. He would be expected to link his destiny to that of the gang on Devil Knob.

Francine's plight made him forget his own dilemma. She was too dainty a prize to escape the conscienceless.

With a man of Crake's caliber, only a little elevated above brute life, she would be quite safe. From the polished rascal of the Baker type she could expect no mercy.

Of course if her father could prove himself to be a big enough criminal to gain the respect of the gang, then Baker might hesitate for a while. Her days of grace would be limited, however, so long as Baker remained above earth and she remained on Wolf Creek. Baker was one who would seek what he desired even if the devil were his leader and ordered to the contrary.

Wearied by his futile meditations, de Croteau rose, stretched his arms above his head and cried:

"I was a fool to come here—a poor, poor

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fool! What am I to do here? Sit here and watch the shadows each day eat up this doorstone and become quite mad? Strike hands with these outlaws and damn myself for all time? Or run for it and find another hiding-place?

"I'd run for it fast enough, and they'd be welcome to try stopping me if— Well, she'll need all the help she can get. I'll hope her father is strong enough to turn the trick and protect her."

He knew that inactivity was his greatest enemy, and there was nothing with which to busy himself. Once Crake brought him a shotgun and rifle he would make for the mountains and weary himself into forgetfulness with hunting and exploring. And yet he knew deep in his heart that even this avenue of escape from the killing monotony would depend largely upon the type of man he should find Rodney to be.

The sunshine left the doorstone, and he entered the cabin and lighted a fire on the hearth and began his simple preparations for the evening meal. He hung a kettle of water to boil and started with a pail for the spring back of the cabin.

He had gone but a few rods when he heard a voice calling his name. He changed his course and proceeded to the creek. In the twilight a tall figure stood on the opposite bank.

"That you, Crake?" he asked.

"'Low it is. Been here a coon's age, trying to make you hear. I got the rifle, and it's a buster. Use' to be Herb Peevy's, and he ain't got no use for it since he was kilt. His widder's been wanting to sell it, but I had to find Bender and git his say-so afore she could.

"Bender was ag'in' the notion at first, but when Corn Crake says a man's all right there ain't much argufying. Got some more good news, too."

And he chuckled as if highly pleased.

"Come across and tell it."

"Mr. de Croteau, I'm a whole b'ar-team of dawgs in a fight. I don't give the lie and I won't take one. Ain't skeered of nothing on two or four feet. I 'low I'm more 'gator then man. I've e't rattlesnakes' hearts fried in painter fat till I sometimes forgit I'm a human. If this crick was filled with blue ruin and I had a prime dry on I could empty it——"

"That's enough," coldly interrupted de Croteau.

"Jest as you say; but I wouldn't take them words from anybody else. You're a helpless stranger, and I won't notice it this time. But not to put too strong a p'int on it, I don't hanker to cross this crick after sundown. I never did and never can git use to ha'nts."

De Croteau splashed through the shallow stream and inspected the rifle. It was in first-class condition so far as he could determine. Crake, while anxious to retire, took time to repeat—

"Got some good news."

"What is it?"

"Old 'Liza—my rifle—ain't 'witched no more. Charm's been tooken off. Split a squirrel's head less'n a hour ago. Yes, sir! That charm's gone plumb to ——, I 'low."

"Good. Don't forget the shotgun. I gave you money enough and over for the two. I want it as soon as I can get it. I'm thinking of going hunting."

"Going hunting, eh? I 'low I'll shove along with you."

"I 'low you won't. I'm going alone."

"See here, mister. I'm your friend, or that would be a poor mess of talk to bring to Corn Crake. My woman's been telling me the good turn you done her when you driv' Black Dawley from the cabin and made him quit his fooling."

"Fooling? He was about to murder your wife!"

"Well, the fault was some mine. There wouldn't 'a' been no trouble at all if I'd done as I oughter, and had had a jug of blue ruin in the cabin. Dawley was disapp'inted when he couldn't git a snort. He knew I always had it. Dad burn, but I always do have it.

"But you meant well by 'Liza—only she oughter made believe to fetch the jug and then fetch him a crack over the head. Never tell a man who's wild for a snort of ruin that the jug's empty. Lambast him and talk about it next day.

"But you meant well, and you can spit fire at me where another man would find his words leaking out through his gizzard. I'm gitting at this; you won't have no luck hunting if I don't go with you."

"Some one will put a charm on my gun, I suppose," sneered de Croteau.

"Knife Bender's mighty keerful as to who goes hunting round these parts. I can't git a shotgun for you 'less he says it's all hunky

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for you to have one. He feels sorter responsible for all strangers along these bottoms. You was free to come in, but moseying round is a dawg of another color. Mebbe I can git Bender's say-so; then the trip will be all right."

"To —— with this man named Bender! I'll take no orders from him."

"Lorry gorry! Don't!" frantically whispered Crake, his tall form shaking. "Some of his friends might be hearing you. He'd cut your throat for half them words. Don't! I'm a man of fambly. He'd pass the knife on to me jest along of my being friendly with you."

"All right. I won't get you into any trouble. Find a shotgun if you can. Good night."

And de Croteau took the rifle across the creek and to the cabin.

BUT while eating his supper and recalling Crake's talk a dull rage against Knife Bender began to occupy his thoughts. The screech of a mountain-lion—the settlers' "painter"—split the drowsy quiet of the evening and added to the background de Croteau was erecting behind the sinister character.

He had not met Bender, but the man's wide influence was reflected in nearly every cabin. De Croteau had met but one man who had not betrayed fear in mentioning Bender; this exception was Buckshot Baker.

"Secure his permission before going hunting, eh?" mumbled de Croteau. "If he interferes with me there'll either be a new chief on the Knob, or else my disappearance will be permanent."

With this defiant resolution he took to his blankets and watched the winking coals grow dull. He dreaded the night. It was then, while trying to win sleep, that all mental makeshifts failed and his mother stole inside his thoughts. With her girlish face before him and her brown eyes sadly searching his soul he lost his reckless mood.

Far into the night he lay motionless with misery flogging his conscience; and it was in such a time of weakness that he heard soft steps outside the cabin. The door was open; the small window had neither glass nor covering. He rose to a sitting posture and thrust some dry twigs among the dying coals.

The steps multiplied and made no attempt at secrecy, and there was a scraping of metal on the window-sill. The twigs burst into flame and expelled the night from the room. Rifle-barrels, two in each window, were covering him. He stood up, but made no move to touch his belt of weapons.

A hand, holding a navy revolver, reached inside the door. A long sharp nose and one black eye showed just above it. Then a nasal, whining voice directed—

"Stick up yer hands and come out here."

De Croteau lifted his hands and walked outside. He found himself surrounded by ten or a dozen men, and several hands swept over his person in search of weapons.

"March!" commanded the leader.

The men formed about their prisoner, and without another word being spoken they started up the creek path toward the hills.

De Croteau dully wondered what it all meant. Almost anything was preferable to the misery of a sleepless night. No one spoke to him, nor did he attempt to make any conversation with questions.

He assumed that he was being taken to Devil Knob, and that the spokesman of the band was Bender. His spirits were so depressed, however, that he was not very curious to behold Bender and learn the quality of that leadership which the man indubitably possessed.

But the Knob was not the destination. Two miles from the Gad cabin the band came to a halt in an opening in the heart of a black-oak growth. A fire, sufficient to illuminate the scene, burned in the center of the opening.

Now de Croteau had a chance to study his captors. Crake was present, persistently keeping his head turned aside. Buckshot Baker was present, and he seemed much amused over the situation. Several men whom de Croteau had known as hunters after the crops were laid by were also there.

Out of the few he had not met before he had no difficulty in picking Bender. His first estimate of the man was far from flattering. An animated gargoyle, he told himself. Because Bender was standing beside the stunted Baker the tall, slight figure of the leader took on additional height. His entire presentment was ludicrous. The long arms, the spindling shanks, the flat chest, the slim, snake-like neck, the grotesque face, all conspired to make him a caricature of a man.

His sobriquet was derived from the two

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wicked bowie-knives in his belt. That this was his favorite weapon was further evidenced by the handle of a third protruding from his right boot-leg. For firearms he carried one navy revolver hanging from a belt slung bandoleer fashion.

"Ye can squat if ye want to," Bender told the prisoner; and de Croteau decided that the whining, wailing note of the man's voice disturbed him. It was in keeping with the ugly figure.

De Croteau seated himself near the fire, and the men dropped in a circle around him. For several minutes Bender stared at his prisoner thoughtfully. His gaze was all the more disconcerting because it seemed to be impersonal.

"Fetch in the evidence," he ordered.

TWO men rose and went to one side of the opening. When they returned they carried a limp form covered with a blanket. De Croteau cudgeled his brains in an effort to identify the shrouded figure. He could remember of no one whom he had met along the creek excepting Black Dawley, Mrs. Crake and the Rodney girl, who was not present.

The blanket was pulled aside, and de Croteau gave a start of repugnance on beholding the black-bearded face of Dawley. Bender waved his hand and the two men turned the figure over to reveal a ghastly wound in the back.

Then the whining voice asked—

"Did you do that to Black Dawley, de Croteau?"

"God forbid! No!" exclaimed de Croteau. With better control of his voice he added—

"I never strike a man from behind."

"Then ye're a fool," said Bender. "Did ye have trouble with Dawley this day?"

"I shot a knife from his hand when he was trying to kill Mrs. Crake. I knocked him down when he tried to pull a gun from his boot and shoot me."

"Fist-fightin' don't git a man very far down here," was Bender's wailing comment.

The peculiar intonation put into de Croteau's head a grotesque comparison with the sighing of an autumnal wind. Bender next said—

"Now, Corn Crake, tell what ye know; an' remember ye're talkin' to me."

Ah, if Eliza could have seen her hero as he faced his chief, licking his dry lips and his big face twitching with fear!

"'Liza told me as how Dawley carried on something dretful at the cabin when he found he couldn't git no licker," he began. "She says as how de Croteau stuck a gun in the winder and whanged a knife outer Dawley's hand. I wa'n't there, chief. I can only say what my woman told me.

"When Dawley come out the cabin, she says, he went for a gun in his boot, and de Croteau fetched him a crack with his bare hand and knocked him down. She says de Croteau knocked him down ag'in for good luck. When Dawley lit out he turned and belted away at de Croteau with his gun, she says. That's all she told me."

Bender rubbed a long finger across the stubble on his sharp chin and blinked at de Croteau a full minute with no one venturing to break the silence. His voice quavered and broke as he finally said:

"Reckon ye didn't do for him, de Croteau. But some one did. Some one got him from behind. Baker here's capable of it if he had a grudge, but Baker was with me when it must 'a' happened. I'd say ye had to be the one, de Croteau, if ye hadn't used yer fist when ye'd been right in usin' a gun.

"Dawley was a dawg. We don't care for Dawley. I'd done for him myself pretty soon, he was that 'onary. But we can't have such works goin' on without knowin' who's doin' the work. What ye trembling for, Crake?"

Crake jumped, so unexpected was the question. His voice shook and he shivered as he explained:

"Jest a tech of dumb ague. Took some walnut pills, but 'Liza must 'a' scraped the bark the wrong way."

The long nose went down and the thin lips curled up in a ferocious grin. Crake cowered back. Bender released him from his gaze and said to de Croteau:

"Ye can come to the Knob tomorrer afternoon. I'll pass on yer case then. I don't take it neighborly that ye should say as how I can go to ——. I ain't the right man to send such words to."

"Well, I did say it. I didn't say it as a message to you. But I said it. Life isn't very pleasant for me. It doesn't make much difference what happens to me."

Baker laughed out loud. Bender's thin, twisted face never changed a muscle.

"Tomorrer afternoon," he whined. "At the Knob. Then I'll let ye know what I've

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decided. Ye'll either make a good man for me, or good bait for catfish."

De Croteau wanted to explode in a fiery defiance, but there was something deadly about the man despite his absurd physical appearance. The effect of his loose limbs, his twisted face and his whining voice was accumulative. He continued:

"After we've settled yer hash we'll take up that t'other stranger, the man Rodney. He's got to come down off the fence and show us where he belongs. That's all. Ye can go back now."

None of the group stirred excepting Baker as de Croteau walked to the creek path. Baker followed after him, announcing—

"I'll go along with you."

"WHY in the —— should that man think I'd kill a man from behind?" wrathfully demanded de Croteau as they walked along the dark and narrow path.

"I suggested that you'd better be investigated," Baker frankly informed him. "Still honest, you see. But life's too short for lying unless it's to get the best of a woman.

"Of course I knew you didn't do it, that you wouldn't have the moral courage to do it. You'd be afraid of your thoughts when alone if you failed to give the other man what you considered to be a fair show.

"Animals don't fight that way. Nature doesn't fight that way. Nature never intended that man should scorn any advantage. She permits him to be born helpless, but she gives him brains. He's supposed to use them to benefit himself, not the other fellow."

"But if you knew I didn't do it—" began de Croteau hotly.

"Hold on! I'm not your champion yet. Besides, it was an excellent chance for you to meet the chief. I knew he'd been hearing things about you from Crake. Crake's a rabbit, a worm. Scared of the chief as he is of old Gad's ghost.

"Of course you can't keep on living by yourself. You're either with us or against us. Don't worry about tomorrow afternoon. I have influence with the chief. He'll take you in all right."

"I'm not worrying. I don't think I shall go to the Knob."

"Ho, ho! I'd like to see Bender's crooked face when he gets that talk. You never saw him foam at the mouth. It's not a pretty sight. The men think it's the devil in him. I believe it's simply a fit. When he's worked up he has them. Some time when he's having one some one will do for him."

"Take the talk to him if you want to. Crake did. No reason why you shouldn't."

"Don't be a fool. If you want to commit suicide jump into the creek and keep your head under water. No one asked you to come down here. Your coming brought officers after you. They may come again."

"I can take care of myself if they do."

"Scarcely what I meant. Their coming means danger for the rest of us. Danger for me. No one can come in here and expose us to danger unless he becomes one of us."

"Nothing to stop me pulling out tomorrow morning—or tonight."

"You'd be potted within a quarter of a mile. Already the word's been given that you're not to leave. Why didn't your horse come to you when you came up this path?"

"They wouldn't harm Red Shot?" cried de Croteau, sick at heart.

"He hasn't been harmed. Too valuable. He was simply withdrawn so you wouldn't try to do anything foolish—like running away. You'll find him grazing as usual in the morning.

"If he isn't back I'll hunt for him. Bad luck to the man who I find holding him."

"Silly talk. Try and understand you can't fight all the men along Wolf Creek."

"I came here to keep out of the sheriff's hands. As to joining Bender's crowd, that's another matter. What about Rodney? He seems to be free to go and come."

"He left a hostage. We're not afraid of his staying away, or spreading any reports about us. When he comes back he'll be invited to the Knob."

After a pause de Croteau asked—

"Does Crake report everything to Bender?"

"So long as he walks about on two legs you can believe that he does," was the sardonic reply. "He's one of the men held responsible for your staying here. He'd shoot you if you tried to light out. He's a spiritless creature. We only use him for home work. We have to have settlers who hunt and store up dried venison and bear-meat for Winter. He's our errand boy.

"Well, I believe I'll wish you a pleasant good night—rather, good morning—and leave you. I'll see you tomorrow afternoon

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at the Knob. Crake will call to show you the way."

"He needn't bother. Life is of no value to me. I'll die fighting."

"When you die you'll be dead before you know it. No heroic battling against odds. A shot in the back, or while you sleep. Or as Dawley died—by the knife."

De Croteau voiced no further defiance, but instead inquired—

"Who did kill Dawley?"

"Crake, of course. He covers up his feeling well, but he was mighty mad that Dawley went to the cabin as he did.

"You'll laugh when I tell you that Crake is jealous of his wife. He need never have cause to be, but he is.

"Then again I told him a bit ago that Dawley had placed an evil charm on his rifle and was boasting of it. It all goes to prove how silly superstition weakens a man. Up to the moment I told him about the charm he was an excellent shot. Bred in the blood for generations. But once that maggot got to working in his simple brain all he could think of was that his gun was bewitched; and he began missing easy shots. He was bound to kill Dawley sooner or later."

"You must have known that when you told him his gun was charmed," said de Croteau, horrified by the merciless presence at his back.

"Why, of course, simpleton! I never relished Dawley. I don't care for certain people in Arkansas to know I'm here on the creek. Dawley was too fond of going to Gainesville, getting drunk and telling too much. That's what Bender meant by saying he would have done for the man himself if some one else hadn't."

"You're absolutely unscrupulous!"

"I hope so. That means I'm absolutely honest with myself. And I don't know yet whether I'm going to like you or not."

"When you have made up your mind you can let me know," said de Croteau wearily.

"You probably will never know. Always honest, you see. When I'm down on a man I'm only honest with myself. I can dissemble."

All de Croteau could think of was a copperhead under foot.

"Baker," he slowly said, "I shall not waste any time trying to get into your good graces. You'll be lucky to get in good with me."

Baker exploded in a laugh of genuine amusement.

"I declare, I begin to like you when reason tells me to go slow. There's something refreshing in your candor. The difference between us is this: you'll be more honest with me than with yourself. I'll fool you if needs require, but I'll never fool myself. Good morning."

"Wait a minute," muttered de Croteau. "There's something else. Miss Rodney."

"Well? What about Miss Rodney?" And Baker's voice was peremptory.

"You told me not to make myself 'at home' there. I take it you meant I had better not call there."

"No 'better' about it. I meant you are not to call there. I'm glad to know you've been sensible enough to keep away."

"I'm calling over there pretty soon; and I won't depend on a derringer, either."

They had separated and were almost invisible to each other. Baker's breath came and went with a hissing sound. De Croteau reached for a gun, then remembered that he was unarmed. Baker said:

"More honest with me than with yourself. Compelled to give me fair warning, and that sort of thing.

"De Croteau, you would have fitted in fine with King Arthur's knights. You're a fool. For the last time, good morning.'

CHAPTER V

ACCEPTED

AFTER a few hours of troubled sleep de Croteau's reckless belligerence returned. He was angry with himself as he reviewed the arraignment before Bender. Where was his spirit? Why had he not flatly refused to have anything to do with the gang? The only excuse he could offer was his lack of weapons.

With the return of the sun came the resolve to parley no longer with the men of the Knob. When Crake called for him in the afternoon he would dismiss him with a message which would soon bring the situation to a climax. If he could take Bender and Baker with him—Baker especially—he would call it a good fight. And he had one duty to perform before making good his defiance to the outlaws.

Belting on his two guns, he started for the Rodney cabin. At times he left the path

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and worked his way through the clumps of bushes, progressing slowly and always shifting his gaze from side to side; for he was remembering Baker's declaration that a man was a fool to spurn an advantage. So he stole along with his hand on his hip, ready for an attack by a hidden assassin. Nothing happened. The gracious Indian-Summer sun mellowed the landscape with a smoky haze half-concealing the hills to the north. Small life rioted in the underbrush and enlivened the trees, and from the stream came the flapping of wings. Bird and animal were free, but only so long as they were successfully vigilant. Squirrel and rabbit romped and played, the ducks and geese sported contentedly, yet with death ever stalking them. It was nature's dictum that one must defend to enjoy. He would take a lesson from the wild life. Then he found a flaw in his line of thought. The furry folks and feathered folks lived only in the present; man was the only animal blessed or cursed by the possession of a tomorrow. To live in the future meant responsibility, the duty of helping the helpless. His morning errand proved that.

None of the furtive forms fleeing before his stealthy steps had any thought except for self. They reminded him of Buckshot Baker. They held the advantage over him; for he must weaken his chances by indulging in what heredity had taught him to call duty.

Innumerable sacrifices had been made in that name. Countless men and women had knowingly faced an unnecessary fate in answer to that soul-call. The lesson offered by the squeaking, pattering life on each side of his advance was worthless after all.

But there was one glorious compensation, de Croteau told himself; those too weak to save themselves had saved others. Having arrived at this conviction, he felt quite sure of himself.

Once when he swung back to the path he saw a settler leading a horse. The square-docked tail of the animal had been lengthened out with hemp as a defense against flies; and it was not customary to dock horses' tails along the southern border of Missouri. Of course the horse had been stolen. Its possession by the settler gained another spy for the gang.

"They're all hooked up together," mused de Croteau. "Those who are honest don't dare to lend a hand to any one the gang is after. All of which makes it hard for the Rodneys unless the old man rides with the crowd."

He saw no sign of Baker, and he removed his hand from his hip as he turned the last bend in the path and stood in view of the cabin. Francine Rodney was seated in the sun. Eliza Crake, broken mug in hand, was on the point of leaving.

De Croteau stepped back from view so that the woman could start for home. He heard her coming down the path, muttering to herself. On discovering him she halted, reluctant to miss the chance of seeing the young people together.

"Land of Zion! How you do give one a start, mister!" she exclaimed.

"Good morning, Mrs. Crake. I hope the children are well," he returned, making to pass her.

"As well as could be 'spected with Madison County b'ilin' yarbs an' what-not in a old kettle an' gittin' his little brothers to drink a few snorts of it in play it's Injun medicine.

"Mighty lucky for Dawley my man didn't come in an' catch him! Corn sartainly would 'a' shortened his life somewhat. If I hadn't a been ailin' with rumity pains an' 'spepsy, an' if that dad-fetched cap had worked, I'd give him a fight. Yes, siree! Why, if he'd seen my man comin' he'd run faster'n gunpowder chased by a gun-flint! When that Corn lets out his war-hoot he sounds like thunder on a twenty-mile prairie.

"But I'm sorter sorry you had to do for Dawley. When he wa'n't in drink he was a right smart hand at makin' you laff."

"Mrs. Crake, I want you to understand this thoroughly: I never killed Dawley," he coldly told her.

THE expressionless, snuff-colored face for once underwent a metamorphosis. Unused muscles disturbed the features, and one faded eye slowly closed in a knowing wink. In disgust de Croteau left her and hurried up the path. Francine was now standing, and her face held no welcome for him. He abruptly began——

"Has that woman been telling you anything about me, Miss Rodney?"

"Only that you killed a man named Dawley," was the cold reply.

"It's false," he earnestly cried. "Her

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husband probably told her that. I whipped Dawley for abusing her, but I never harmed him."

"It sounded as if it might be so," she said. "The other time you were here you freely admitted having killed a man. Eliza is ignorant, but I believe she is honest."

"She may believe it, but it's not so."

"You don't have to make any defense to me," she told him, her voice sounding weary and discouraged.

"But you're believing it!" he protested. "You're thinking me guilty of an atrocious act. Dawley was a vicious ruffian. The world's well rid of him. But I did not kill him. Why, the fellow was struck down from behind!"

"And you always give them a chance?" she bitterly queried.

"Oh, Miss Rodney, don't make it so hopeless for me. I'm no desperado. If you are bound to take me for one I might as well join Bender's gang and be done with it."

"What I take you for has nothing to do with what you will do," she sharply retorted. I've seen you only once before today."

"Twice," he corrected. "The time I thought you were a ghost, when you lost a book at the Gad cabin. Before coming down here I shot a gambler who was trying to kill me."

"I don't want to hear about it. I don't want your confidences. You're a stranger to me."

He stared at her in silence for a few moments; then said:

"All right. I don't want to annoy you. I wouldn't be here now if I didn't believe it's my duty to warn you that you and your father should be leaving this place at once, that you must be very careful in stealing away.

"Bender's men took me from my cabin last night and charged me with killing Dawley. I satisfied them, his mates, that I did not kill the brute.

"While with them I learned enough to know it's not safe for you to remain here. Whatever your father's reason may be for coming here he'd best risk anything in order to leave this place."

"Why is his case so different from yours?" she suspiciously asked. "Why isn't it necessary for you to run away from the creek?"

"That's what I must do, or join the gang."

"And if my father joins them he'll not be troubled."

"You miss the point. Can't you realize you're an unusual woman, doubly so to the men along Wolf Creek? These men look on you as a prize.

"Why does Baker come here and bother you? He counts you as his. Will he stop once your father is taking orders from Bender? What if Bender becomes interested once he sees you? It's because of *you* that I say your father had best risk anything rather than stay here."

She sank down on the porch, overcome by physical weakness. Her eyes were half-closed as she faintly said:

"I am sick at heart with worry. It doesn't seem possible that the sun shone for me a few months ago. Just what does this man Bender want of my father?"

"That he confess his reason for coming here, and join the gang. Bender will have no one on Wolf Creek he does not have a hold on."

"Confess his reason for coming here?"

And she gave a little hysterical laugh.

"Well," she continued, "when he gets back we'll see about it. It's for him to decide. He'll be returning any time now. They can't make him join their gang until he gets back from the hills."

"The prime question isn't whether he hitches up with Bender or not. It's a question of *you*. The minute he comes back have him take you away. Leave at night.

"I warn you that you will be watched. You must be very shrewd. I'll help you all I can. He must have been crazy to bring you into this place."

"I go where he goes," she calmly said. "I'm much obliged for your offer of help but——"

As she did not finish he did so for her, saying:

"Meaning you'll thank me to mind my own business. Lucky I'm not working for thanks; so I'll do what I can for you. Whether it's much or little it will be my best. Good morning."

She rose and with a little jarring note in her voice said—

"Baker talks much the same way."

"Baker is a confessed liar. He boasts of it," de Croteau gravely told her. "He believes it's a feather in his cap to lie to a woman. He has bragged to me to that effect. Don't trust me unless you can trust

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me thoroughly, but *never* trust Baker. You're not safe here. It's terrible to think of your staying here alone in this cabin."

"The windows and door are barred at night. I have weapons and know how to use them."

With that she turned back to the door, and de Croteau walked down the path. As he made for the Gad cabin he carried with him a sense of defeat. He had been misjudged. She believed he had some motive in urging her to leave the creek.

WHEN half-way to the cabin he was overtaken by Hawkins County Crake, who was carrying a covered tin dish. Young Crake puffed mightily with importance as he extended the dish and explained:

"Mam sent it. Pap lined Old Blackie (bear) ag'in' the moon last night. Pap says when Blackie fell out the tree he made more noise'n a wild hoss loose in a cane-brake. Mam barbecued some for you."

De Croteau thanked him and gave him a coin. His progress over the back trail was marked by his exultant whoops long after his tow-head had been lost among the bushes.

De Croteau continued on to the cabin and was carrying the dish on both hands when he entered. He was in no position to defend himself if the figure in the corner should act aggressively.

His first thought was of Bender, for the intruder was a tall man. A second glance revealed a neatly trimmed beard and better apparel than the denizens of the creek were used to wearing.

The man was seated sidewise to the door; and, either by accident or design, the rifle across his knees covered the entrance. He was nervous, or clumsy, in handling the gun, de Croteau decided.

"Make yourself at home," greeted de Croteau after recovering from his surprize.

"Who are you?" harshly demanded the stranger.

"Jefferson de Croteau, fugitive from justice. Arrived here on the run. Who the —— are you?"

The man lost some of his alertness, and the hands holding the gun relaxed.

"Had to run for it, eh?" he muttered, his bushy gray brows drawing down. "I saw a horse outside. First token I had this place was occupied. It was empty when I went away. I've just come down from the hills."

"Then your name will be Rodney!" exclaimed de Croteau.

Up leaped the rifle, and a gray eye blazed along the barrel.

"Yes, I'm Rodney. Jethuel Rodney. What of it? Think you've run me down?"

De Croteau laughed softly.

"Run you down? Good Lord! The man Crake will tell you I arrived in front of a shower of lead sent after me by the sheriff of Greene County. Put down your gun, man; the law doesn't reach to Wolf Creek yet."

But Rodney preferred to keep the gun across his knee. De Croteau placed the dish on the table, and, taking great care not to touch his weapons, slowly unbuckled his belt and let it fall to the floor. Kicking it aside, he said:

"There. I'm unarmed. Now let's talk."

"Go ahead and talk," said Rodney, his gaze still hard with suspicion. De Croteau seated himself on a three-legged stool and briefly outlined his reason for coming to Wolf Creek. His story seemed to make an impression on Rodney, who curtly asked him to name certain prominent men in Springfield and describe their business and appearance. Next the young man told of his visit to Francine and repeated his warning of the girl's danger.

Down came the bushy brows again, and Rodney said:

"It seems you're mighty much concerned about people who are entire strangers to you. It seems as if you're mighty keen to have us break cover and quit this creek."

De Croteau was thoroughly discouraged.

"Think what you will of me," he said. "But don't leave your daughter again. I've talked with Baker. I tell you she is in danger."

"I'll kill Baker!" gritted Rodney.

"After you do—and it'll be a mighty good job—then you must be quick about kill ing Bender and all his tools."

Rodney fumbled his beard, his gray eyes showing much uneasiness.

"You may mean well, and you may not. How do I know you're not from Arkansas? You've talked glib about Springfield, but any one could post up on names if they wanted to use that town in a story."

"I'm not from Arkansas. But I don't

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see what difference it would make if I was."

Rodney rose and with a grating laugh informed the other:

"It makes the difference of life or death to you, young man. I may be a fool, but I'm going to believe you're from Springfield. Not because of what you say, but because of the horse outside. The horse is your alibi.

"I don't know anything about you except what you have told me. You may be de Croteau, or some one else. Your best proof is your horse. If you didn't steal the animal your story is true, I believe.

"I'm glad I've met you and had this talk. I had expected to meet some one else. I'm glad I've been disappointed. Happily so. Now I don't want you coming to my cabin again till we get better acquainted."

"Good. That means you're going to stick close and look after your daughter. I forgot to mention that the man Bender reckons to have you in his gang."

Rodney turned in the doorway and said:

"It wouldn't be a bad move to make, perhaps. You've joined, of course."

"No. And I don't intend to."

Rodney eyed him curiously. De Croteau flushed and explained—

"There's a big difference between killing a man in self-defense and in robbing people."

"Undoubtedly true," agreed Rodney with a grim smile. "But from your talk one would take it that this isn't the best place in the world for a man to be ethical."

He hurried down the path, and de Croteau stood in the doorway and tried to determine what kind of man this strange neighbor of his was.

Giving it up as a bad task, he opened the covered dish and found a pone of bread and three slices of bear-meat. He ate hungrily, and was glad that the Crake cabin was not closed to him. There was none other he could visit.

To live by himself and fight the inexorable advance of the lonely hours, to listen to the accusations of the night, did not seem to be within his endurance. Better to risk death in a ride across the border into Arkansas or into Indian Territory than this blighting monotony.

He recalled Baker's warning that he would be shot if he attempted to leave the creek, but that danger only whetted his desire to escape. A running fight would give the affair a sporting turn, and so long as the blood was hot retrospection could not bother one. Give him a lead on the southern road and he would gamble his life on Red Shot carrying him through.

With something to plan out, to prepare for, he lost some of his melancholy. From the Crakes he would learn the best route across the border. He would be very cunning in ascertaining the travel facts; for Crake told all to his master.

Down tumbled his plans when he turned his thoughts toward Francine Rodney. Duty spoke and directed him to abandon all thoughts of flight. The Voice had been heeded by many a de Croteau.

The last of the family did not believe that Rodney could protect his daughter. He was no match for Bender or Baker in savage determination; nor for Crake in cunning. The gang would soon set him aside and proceed to determine who should have the girl.

De Croteau thought of Jessie Lascar placed in a similar peril, and shuddered. The two girls were the best of their types. But there was something in Francine which was reminiscent of his mother, some quality held in common. Undoubtedly he had sensed it from the first words he had exchanged with the girl, but he believed he made the discovery there in the gloomy cabin soon after Rodney's departure.

"—! It would be sacrilege to leave one in trouble no matter how vaguely she reminded me of *maman*," he whispered. "I must stick."

Belting on his weapons, he sought the company of his one true friend, his horse. Red Shot had reveled in the rich pasturage of the bottoms, and was not restrained even by hobbles.

On hearing his master's voice he came rushing down on him, bounding and kicking and showing his teeth in a wicked grin. When within a few paces of his master he swirled aside and pretended to launch out with his heels. Then his ears pricked forward and he was eagerly crowding against de Croteau and muzzling him with his velvet nose.

"You're the only one that understands me; the only one that'll stick by me and not give a —— no matter what I do," murmured de Croteau as he caressed the fine head.

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"A LIKELY animal," remarked Baker from the edge of the bushes.

De Croteau ducked behind the horse and drew a gun.

"Not necessary," called out Baker, stepping clear of the bushes and holding up his empty hands.

Replacing his gun and feeling ashamed, de Croteau apologized:

"You startled me. Yes, Red Shot is a mighty fine horse."

"You'd hate to lose him, I'll wager," said Baker, folding his arms.

"Lose him? I'll not lose him."

"Let us hope not. Crake will call this afternoon to take you to the Knob."

"He'll waste his time. I'm not going. I'll fight first."

"You're fooling yourself. There'll be no fight. You won't hear the gun crack that does for you.

"However, I'll be honest enough to say that your refusal won't result in any personal harm at first. Bender has a wearing-down process he uses when dealing with a stubborn case and when he's in a mood to give a man a little time."

"Just how will he go about wearing me down?" asked de Croteau jeeringly.

"I believe he's given orders that your horse be shot if you fail to show up at the Knob as ordered."

"Shoot my horse?" gasped de Croteau, his face becoming damp with nervous sweat.

"I agree with you. It would be a cruel waste of good horseflesh," sighed Baker. "But Bender knows he must be obeyed if he continues as leader in this section."

De Croteau fondled the soft muzzle and fought against his pride. His duty to Red Shot was imperative. And to kill the wonderful creature would be so easy. There would be no guarding against it. He had been prepared to resist threats against his own life.

"I'll be ready when Crake calls for me," he surrendered.

"A man of sense," was the cheery endorsement. "Nothing disagreeable about visiting the Knob, you know. It's only a few miles. The view from the top is pleasing. The men are a trifle uncouth, but that simply means they have lacked opportunities. In a day or so Rodney will make the trip."

"Is he back from the hills?" innocently asked de Croteau.

Baker laughed heartily, then said:

"Well done! But Rodney has been trailed from the moment he broke cover in the hills. He called on you. He was escorted to his home without being aware of the honor. Oh, there's no doubt about his visiting the chief at headquarters. I'm glad you've changed your mind. I'll see you at the Knob."

Baker turned back into the bushes. De Croteau called after him—

"Perhaps you also know I was at the Rodney cabin this morning."

"Mrs. Crake so informed me. It was foolish of you."

De Croteau stared in the direction of the voice, but he neither saw nor heard anything more of Baker; which was a compliment to the fellow's woodcraft.

Baker had effaced himself as silently as a snake slips through the wet grass.

This brief interview impressed more thoroughly upon de Croteau the realization that it would be difficult for him or the Rodneys to make a move without some spy promptly reporting it. Mrs. Crake would send him food, and would, he was positive, wish him well in ordinary matters. But she would never dream of withholding anything from Bender, or Baker, his right-hand man.

After eating his midday meal de Croteau cleaned his rifle, a Spencer. Then he took thought of his financial affairs. He had brought four thousand dollars with him from Springfield, the result of his wager on Red Shot. Crake had seen him display a considerable sum of money, and now that de Croteau was realizing that he was not his own man, that Crake had probably informed Bender about the money, he decided it was best to hide it.

Retaining only a hundred dollars on his person, he took the gold and secreted it in a hole in a big walnut opposite the door. The paper money must be safeguarded against rodents, so he wrapped it securely in a piece of dressed buckskin—an heirloom of old Gad's occupancy—and buried it beneath a flat rock at one side of the hearth.

He had barely removed all signs from the earthen floor when Crake called loudly from across the creek. De Croteau answered, and soon Crake appeared, trailing his rifle. His simple features looked worried.

"If I didn't have a soul as big as a courthouse," he began as he broke through the bushes, "I wouldn't be leaving my hunting

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jest to please Knife Bender. Not but Bender's all right. Only t'other day he was 'lowing that men of my metal is mighty scurse—as scurse as rocks in New Madrid County. But I ain't prospering as I oughter. Mebbe I'll jest quit him. I can spunk up to anything when I want to. What say to you 'n' me making a break for the hills?"

De Croteau whistled to the horse, swung himself into the saddle, and then replied:

"Crake, you're a poor liar. Let's not talk about it any more."

"By smoke! You stand mighty close to old death when you speak thataway to Corn Crake! Lucky for you I feel friendly for you."

"I know," mumbled de Croteau. "And I know Bender put you up to making this talk about me lighting out with you. We'll go to the Knob, and you can tell him you reckon I'm going to stick."

Crake's broad face was tremulous with fear as he strode along at the stirrup and gazed up into de Croteau's face. In a whimpering whisper he pleaded:

"Don't talk that loud and keerless-like! You won't tell things, I know. Oh, if you ever should! Knife Bender's the devil. Oh, Lawd! Now I've cut my throat! If you ever yip a word I'll be picked up dead under a bush."

"Don't be a fool. I suppose you have to carry out your orders. I don't hold it against you."

"I dassent go ag'n' orders," whispered Crake, afraid that the very bushes along the path had ears. "One feller did that—jest overlooked some trifling order; didn't 'mount to shucks—and Bender had his ears off next morning. Lawd! What be I saying?

"Then there's 'Liza. She 'lows I've got the old spirit I had in Tennessee. But I'd be dead if I showed any of it.

"I have to be meeching. I'd be called to the cabin door and I'd drap dead if I showed my real spirit. I've been meeching so long because of Bender that it gits to be a second natur'. Some of his riding men pick on me 'cause I don't go on any rides.

"But come to think of it, mister, I ain't so —— meeching after all. I 'low Black Dawley found that out—devil roast him!"

For a moment he swaggered and carried his head high. Then the old fear returned to his soul, and de Croteau feared he was going to weep when he began begging:

"Oh, Mr. Croteau, don't! *Don't* let on a yip what I said 'bout Black Dawley. It's my way of speaking. Never teched a ha'r of his head. No, sir!

"Craps going to be mighty sorry in this neighborhood. No rain, and the chances for seeding was slim. What corn came up was tore down mightily. Coons and t'other varmints got the most of it. Man's got to live, and Bender won't see nary a man go hungry or with his jug empty, if he carries out orders."

"I understand," de Croteau wearily replied.

"Back in Hawkins County, Tennessee, I was known as a man of spirit," resumed Crake, his head coming up. "They use' to say I looked for trouble like a wolf hunts ven'son. When they heard I was on a rampage they always set their triggers. One feller 'lowed he was king of B'ar Mountain, but I swallered him quicker'n the yarthquake did New Madrid. Yes, sir!"

And he stole a glance to see what impression he was making. But it was evident from the far-away expression on de Croteau's face that he had heard nothing of the boasting.

THE five miles were soon covered, and de Croteau emerged from his dreaming to stare curiously at the grass-covered opening on the top of the hill. Half a dozen rough shelters were scattered about the rendezvous; but it was a long log cabin, with smoke rising from the mud-and-rock chimney, that Crake said was their objective.

"They've got something to drink and a snack to eat," he jubilantly cried. "Leave your nag in there."

And, pointing to an open shed, where half a dozen horses were tethered, he sped on in advance. De Croteau dismounted without going to the shed and turned Red Shot loose to graze.

There were no men in sight, yet he felt that he was being watched. Crake already had vanished inside the cabin. De Croteau gave a hitch to his belt and followed him.

He was in ill humor with himself for being there. As he halted in the door and waited for his eyes to get used to the shadows at the end of the room where the men were congregated around a smoking fireplace, some one laughed derisively. The laugh was meant for him.

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He entered and slowly walked down the long room. There were six men lounging on settles. Crake stood leaning against the wall and slyly flirted his hand in a gesture that de Croteau interpreted to be a signal for him to retreat. Bender was not present; neither was Baker.

De Croteau stood in the middle of the floor until he had glanced at each face. They were strangers to him, and this fact surprized him.

Nor did they type Crake and other settlers whom de Croteau had met. Heavily bewhiskered, their belts crowded with weapons, it was easy to deduce that none of them bothered with raising crops. What they took out of life they obtained by violence. They were the "riding" members of the gang. They formed an aristocracy, as was shown by Crake's meek aloofness.

"Acts like he was scared, Whills," remarked a man holding a jug.

"Reckon his mammy don't know he's out," said another.

This was greeted with a chorus of laughter.

"What ye want here, younker?" demanded a hoary-headed sinner.

De Croteau advanced a few steps, but made no reply. The ancient villain pretended to be frightened and begged:

"Please don't come hellin' round here with them guns. Please don't be rough with us."

This also was deemed to be fine wit, and there was more laughter.

Then the first speaker lazily said—

" 'Bout time Bige Whills looked over this candidate, ain't it?"

A gruff assent greeted the suggestion. De Croteau braced himself for what was coming.

One of the men, whose long mustaches hung down and came together far below his chin, rolled off a settle and stood up. His hair, like that of his mates, had not felt a comb for weeks, and hung in an unkempt mass below the greasy collar of his shirt. Six wild men, de Croteau mentally styled them as the man called Whills advanced.

He was still staring at their disheveled ferocity curiously when Whills suddenly snapped his fingers close to his face. Involuntarily he jerked back his head, whereat the onlookers laughed.

"Ain't got used to the bit yet," cried one.

"He needs to feel spurs," growled Whills without shifting his evil eyes from his victim's face.

Next he called to his mates:

"Look at this hyar feller in store clothes! What kind of a sheruff can they have up North that lets this finnified creetur' git cl'ar?"

Then to de Croteau he hoarsely announced:

"We're reckonin' ye're too soft to run with this outfit. How many notches on them guns o' yers?"

De Croteau kept silent, and after a moment's pause Whills spat as a symbol of his rich disgust and cried:

"Hi, boys! This feller ain't nary a notch on his guns. How's that?"

Oaths and much denunciation answered the speaker. Pleased by this endorsement of his baiting, Whills solemnly announced:

"Ye're now lookin' on Bige Whills, one o' the first man-eaters in the Ozarks. See this gun?"

And he pulled a long forty-four and shoved it offensively close to de Croteau's nose.

"Count them notches out loud. Time we heard ye crow."

De Croteau was almost happy. The ruffian was affording him a vent for his sullen rage. He stepped back as if afraid of the weapon, and the spectators again found the proceedings very humorous. Crake, crouching against the wall, seemed to be paralyzed with fear.

"Keep yer footin'," growled Whills. "Git to work on them notches. Count 'em afore I take a notion to add another."

"Does each notch represent a human life?" timidly asked de Croteau.

The query brought a howl of delight. The white-haired member profanely declared it was the best fun he had seen in years. Whills showed his long teeth in a malicious grin and assured the other:

"It do. An' a better man then ye can ever be."

"Then all I have to say is that folks are easily caught napping where you came from," said de Croteau softly. "For I don't believe you ever shot a man when he was facing you."

It required a few moments for this response to percolate through Whills' thick wits. Slowly the malignant grin faded from his hairy face to be replaced by an expression of murderous rage. The men on the settles

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jumped to their feet in delighted expectancy.

"Ye're goin' to eat that gun for that," huskily said Whills, still holding the barrel under de Croteau's nose while his other hand made a grab for the young man's ear.

De Croteau's left hand flashed up and knocked the weapon aside, and the next moment the muzzle of his thirty-six was all but in the bully's mouth.

"Put that gun up, you scum," he commanded. "Get back there with your mates. Never try any silly game on me again, or I'll hurt you past mending. I'm here to meet the leader, not the dogs of the pack."

Helpless and half-mad with rage, Whills began backing toward the group. Over the faces of the other five desperadoes crept the lust to kill. Crake was trembling violently and essaying to flattening his big frame against the logs behind him. Curses were howled and bloody threats made. Then the old man snarled:

"He's only one! All together!"

De Croteau struck Whills with his left fist, knocking him under a table; and by the time the man struck the earthen floor two guns instead of one covered the group. And he asked—

"Now who'll be first to take a jump into ——?"

THE quintet stood with weapons half-drawn, with a dazed, foolish expression on their faces. But if they were nonplused and not ready for action Whills believed he had a distinct advantage. He secured it by tipping the table over so that its stout oak planks would furnish him a breastwork. And the barrel of his notched gun slipped over the edge.

Before he could fire, before de Croteau could fire, there came a wailing howl from the open door; and a streak of light passed over de Croteau's shoulder, and a long bowie-knife was buried in the table close to the muzzle of Whills' gun. With a grotesque spring Bender was beside de Croteau, standing in front of him, his right arm flung back, his fingers gripping the tip of another knife.

"Don't, chief!" howled the old man. "Ye 'lowed we was to try the new man out."

"But not to kill him if he showed spirit, ye dogs!" whined Bender. "De Croteau, put up yer guns. Quick!"

And as de Croteau sullenly obeyed, the uplifted knife was lowered.

"And if I hadn't took a hand I 'low he'd 'a' done for the six of ye. Whills, come from ahind that table mighty pert."

Whills crawled forth and stood cowering before his master. To de Croteau Bender said:

"These are some of my boys. Rough, but warm hearted. Ye'll see much of 'em in the futur'. Ye fellers remember this is my man. No games on him. That's all for today. Crake, go home with him."

"What the —— does it all mean?" demanded de Croteau.

Bender's long neck swayed from side to side as he answered:

"Jest to try yer mettle. Jest to l'arn if ye'd do for my boys. Ye'll do fine."

"You called me way up here for this bit of horse-play?" remonstrated de Croteau.

"It was either hoss-play or yer funeral without nary fixin's nor preacher. Don't find any fault, young feller. Baker won't know till Crake gits back if ye be dead or alive."

"Is every one tried this way?" asked de Croteau, curiosity mastering him as he thought of Francine Rodney's father.

"Every one, 'less we know him well," shrilly replied Bender.

"Then I'll go," said de Croteau, turning to the door.

"But don't go beyond yer cabin till ye git my say-so. Ye may git orders any time to take a ride. When I know how far ye can be trusted it'll be made easier for ye."

"Meaning I'm now a member of your band?" asked de Croteau, the thought bringing nausea.

"What was ye fetched up here for?" snarled Bender. "When I want a man loaded with lead or steel I don't have to have him fetched up the Knob to give him his needin's.

"Ye belong. I'm yer boss. Be keerful, Crake, move quick."

Crake fairly fled from the room. More deliberately de Croteau followed and whistled for his horse. Red Shot came up at a gallop, and his master leaped into the saddle.

All the way home Crake volubly disclosed his plans for routing the whole gang had de Croteau been in actual danger. For the five-mile ride, however, de Croteau was barely conscious of the boastful chatter. One thought rang like a bell in his mind: he had been accepted as a member of a ruthless gang of cutthroats. And he had not refused the terrible allegiance.

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CHAPTER VI

THE PEDLER

FOR several days de Croteau remained close at home. He was worried over his failure to defy Bender at the Knob. Why hadn't he done it? He put the question several times and each time shook his head. He did not believe he was afraid of death. He feared he was afraid of treachery. He considered his reasoning absurd, and yet it persisted. He angrily insisted that if a man is to die it is better to be killed from ambush, to have it over with before he could be conscious of his fate. Yet gradually he grew to believe it was the uncertainty that he had feared, the stealthy step in the night every time some animal prowled about the cabin, the hidden assassin each time the south wind stirred a bush. He could understand how innocuous alarms might work on his imagination until it would be a mercy to meet the enemy in the opening.

In self-defense he argued that he was committed in no way to the gang's schemes. Bender had accepted him, but it did not follow that he had accepted Bender. Yet he felt cheapened even to have Bige Whills and his hairy companions assume that the gang had won another recruit.

He saw no one except Crake, who called each day during the sunlight hours to learn his wishes and to spy upon him. He observed, with mild surprize perhaps, that Crake was viewing him with new respect. He was elevated in Crake's esteem because of the latter's belief he was a member of the gang. Even this was preferable to having the illiterate creature look on him as a brother weakling.

While debarred from visiting the Rodney cabin, he would have walked abroad on the chance of meeting Francine if it had not been for the fear of her contempt. Mrs. Crake, he had no doubt, had lost no time in telling her how he had joined the gang.

On the third day he was surprized to have Bender call on him. The manner of the man's coming was disquieting. De Croteau was standing in the doorway, gloomily viewing the empty clearing. There was no sign of human life.

He turned his head to reach inside the door for his pipe, and when he faced back Bender was sitting on the doorstone at his feet, his long arms hugging his knees.

"Did you drop out of the sky or pop up from ——?" asked de Croteau.

"Wanted to make sure ye was by yer lone," whined Bender. "Hear ye've been stickin' mighty close here. My orders didn't mean for ye not to move from this place."

De Croteau winced.

Bender began talking again, touching on various subjects, and the young man's interest was aroused despite the abhorrence he felt for the fellow. He was discovering there was more than one man in Bender. This was not the chief of Devil Knob who sat on the doorstep and talked of the changing foliage, of the habits of animals and the prospects for next season's crops. His whining intonation was less offensive, or less noticeable, and beyond his first words he did not once assume a masterful rôle. Through his rambling talk ran a suggestion of melancholy.

Suddenly he broke off and said:

"I ain't built like other men. I'm queer to look at. When I was a younker I l'arned there was only one way to stop men from laffin' at me. That was to make 'em fear me. When I found that out—an' I'd been badgered and knocked round all over southern Missouri—I was like a man fightin' drunk on blue ruin. For a year I ran wild, gunnin' for trouble.

"When I fetched up here on this crick with more'n one sheriff wantin' me there was mighty few men who'd grin out the corner of their faces when I went by. Any such was sure to be strangers.

"Ever since then I've sorter had to keep it up. Keep 'em skeered and they'll eat outer my paw. Once I weaken, and they'll be after me like a wolf pack that l'arns its leader's bleedin' from some hurt. Of course I'll be done for some day, but not s'long as I can heave a knife."

HAD de Croteau but known it, this was more of biography than Bender had ever confided to any man. Shifting abruptly about, he began asking questions; and before de Croteau fully realized it he was freely baring his antecedents and explaining his present plight.

"Hard luck," commiserated Bender. "I had doubts 'bout ye at first. I'd already tooken one eddicated cuss in—Buckshot Baker. Somehow I feel at times that

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Baker ain't long for this world. If I'm mistook, then he's goin' to outlive me.

"Baker ain't jest our kind. He was high in the K. K. K. He's up here to save his pelt. He looks down on us critters as bein' rough and simple-minded.

"I'm living here the year round. Baker's proud. He was raised to be fussy 'bout his clothes and victuals. I can do better with homespun folks. He feels he's high above me. He don't relish takin' orders from me. But he'll take 'em, —— him!"

For a moment Bender's terrible ferocity shone in his ugly face. After a minute the passion vanished, and his high-pitched, singsong voice was monotonously explaining:

"In lots of counties down in Arkansas there ain't no courts nor sheriffs. Governor Clayton has put the State under martial law.

"The K. K. K. has been runnin' things, and they ain't quit yet. If a man's caught there ain't no jailer to lock him up. There ain't no jury dares try him. No judge dares send him to prison.

"Jest now things is nip and tuck atween the State troops and the Ku Klux. If a K. K. K. gits caught napping he's nailed.

"That's what almost happened to Baker. He come up near the Missouri line ag'in' the caution of his friends. Jest his devil-may-care way. Can't see only one thing at a time. This time it was some woman. Shows how he never could be a leader of men like mine.

"He got cut off by the troops, and hed to jump up here to save his hide. 'T'ain't been safe for him to go back. And he knows he's got to dig out mighty soon or have it harder. Once the K. K. K. is licked the roads to Injun Territory and Texas will be mighty hard travelin' for him. He's a marked man with a price on his head.

"There's folks down there who j'ined the Ku Klux to save their lives or property; or along of thinkin' 'twas a political party 'stead of a military one. Baker's raised —— with lots of such. Once they ain't afraid of the K. K. K. they'll lay for him right smart han'some. I 'low I've said 'nough to show which way a coon will jump."

"I haven't any love for Baker," frankly de Croteau informed the other. "He's not harmed me as yet. But I don't take to him. I don't believe he wants any one to take to him."

"That sounds like a good talk. He don't give a cuss whether ye like him or not. Jest now he's all fired up with another woman game. I never lost a man in all my runnin' the gang 'less it was in one of three ways—shot on a raid, drunk and helpless when jumped, or caught by the officers watchin' his woman.

"Now it's the Rodney gal. I ain't never been to the cabin. I ain't pretty for a woman to ook at. I've seen her at a distance. She looks mighty likely. She oughter be livin' in a shingle-roof house.

"I ain't made up my mind what to do with her if her old man don't pan out. I can't send her back to the settlements; for she's that master purty she'd raise —— and a army with her han'some face and tears, and it would be good-by to Knife Bender.

"Baker's had his way too long with women. I've worked hard and been lonely. I'm human. I'd be a kindly creatur' to the right woman.

"Well, we'll see. She may hanker for Baker. That would make me feel ugly, I 'low. I'd be a better ch'ice for her."

He broke off and stared at the western sky. De Croteau said nothing. With a start Bender shook off his spell and whined: "Ye needn't keep so close here. Git out round. I'll tell Crake and t'others who've been keepin' watch that it's all right.

"Visit yer neighbors. I want all the boys to know ye by sight.

"We're takin' it soft and cool jest now, waitin' for some of the men below the line to fetch back a sartain word. I've got a big dish on cookin'. Most ready to b'ile over. Ye'll be in on that.

"We've got to make our pile afore the law hits these bottoms. After that I'm goin' to take my best men and strike for Texas. Stir round a bit. So-long."

And with a reptilian twist of his long neck he ducked his head and lounged into the path up the creek.

The man was atavistic, a biological freak. De Croteau was convinced of that. And yet he rated Bender above Baker in the humanities. Baker might be less repellent in outward appearance, and he surely knew the difference between right and wrong.

Bender was something of a monstrosity to look upon. He followed his inclinations with no more concern than as if he had been a wild beast.

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Yet not all his tendencies were evil. He killed from expediency, or when his limited intelligence could discover no other way.

He discussed his robberies just as Enoch Lascar would talk profit and loss. Still, de Croteau believed that the man could be capable of friendships. Baker could never be true to any such bond.

A woman could make a fool of Bender, but no amiable errors would ever humanize Baker. Bender would face the man he wanted removed and kill him in the open. Baker would laugh at a man taking a needless risk, and would slay from behind. His devil's logic considered a fair fight a weakness. Yet what a pair of remorseless creatures for the Rodneys to contend with.

The other members of the gang, so far as de Croteau had observed them, were vicious ruffians, but only spasmodically dangerous. Each was a bully, therefore streaked with cowardice; all needed a strong hand to hold them to the line. As for astuteness they were so many cattle. Bender was brains for all.

AFTER Bender's departure de Croteau remained in the doorway trying to work out this problem: How could he get the girl out of the country? His task seemed the more hopeless because of his conviction that she would refuse to save herself so long as her father was imperiled.

But before he could move to save one, or both, he must win their confidence. This in itself was an insurmountable obstacle, he feared, as he recalled Rodney's ungracious bearing when warning him to avoid the cabin.

Now that he had seen Rodney he speculated much on the man's reason for hiding. Rodney was not a man who was accustomed to carrying firearms. This much was betrayed by his awkwardness in handling the rifle and the absence of any belt guns. In type he reminded de Croteau of certain New England merchants he had met in St. Louis; sober, industrious men, who relied on the law to enforce their rights.

"He must have stolen. He wouldn't be up to gun-play," mused de Croteau as he rose to follow Bender's advice and walk abroad.

He went as far as the creek and halted, perplexed to decide on an objective. The Rodney cabin was prohibited. The next nearest cabin was Crake's. The woman's irrelevant chatter wearied him fully as much as did her husband's boasting. She was much at the Rodney cabin, however, and would have something to tell. This tipped the balance toward the Crakes', and incidentally he would learn what progress Corn had made in securing the shotgun. He crossed the creek, struck into a footpath and loitered.

For the first time since coming to the creek he was conscious of the miracle nature was working in shifting from Summer to Winter. He was surprized to observe how many ingredients were necessary in effecting the change. She worked with insect life as painstakingly as she did with the blue heavens. She worked with the foliage and scampering squirrels, with soft haze and southerly breezes. Not long would these gentle caresses continue; and once the cold rains were poured in, it would be difficult traveling for those who would leave Ozark County in a hurry.

Nor could de Croteau find any gift in the Indian Summer which could lighten the load dragging down on his heart. The glories of sky and earth filled him with deep melancholy. It was all symbolic of life's Summer ended, and he was finishing his opportunities a bankrupt in all that youth hopes to achieve.

Nature's change came gradually; the overturn in his life had been horribly abrupt. In one fatal moment he had lost social station, commercial success, the preference of Jessie Lascar, and had broken the heart of his little mother. The last was infinitely the worst. Never could he be so love-lorn, so lost in self, as to fail to measure something of his mother's agony.

Winking back the tears, he threw himself on the ground and faced his future. Was it possible to do worse by his mother than he already had done.

This was purely rhetorical; he knew she would feel the disgrace of any allegiance with Bender's gang worse than his death a dozen times over. Yet he had been to the Knob; he had talked with Bender at the Gad cabin. Twice it had been given him to make a stand and refuse to be dishonored.

"I never intended to do anything indecent," he slowly said, speaking aloud as if to make his voice carry to the one woman who would always love him regardless of his faults. "I was just jockeying for position, *maman*. I'm going to be potted, *maman*,

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the first time I refuse to answer the bit. But I'll die clean; and, given a chance, I'll die hard. It'll make it easier for *mon père* if he knows that."

Strengthened by his unconscious prayer, he resumed his way. Dogs and children and Crake and his wife were grouped together, and neither human being nor animal noticed the newcomer. De Croteau quickly discovered the cause of this ignorement to be a pedler. He was displaying his wares, and the Crake family was enraptured.

The pedler had but one arm, a fact which suggested service in the late war; but he was most dexterous in untying knots and opening small bales of goods. It was uncanny to witness the efficiency of his teeth in doing duty for the missing limb. In untying a knot they were better than fingers. In opening a bolt of gaudy calico they caught the loose end and with a flirt of the head did the work of two hands. Being thus engaged, he was silent perforce. He wore a forty-four revolver on his right hip. He was thin and sparse, and his creased face denoted great physical suffering. He was quick in his motions.

On hearing de Croteau's step he spun about most nimbly and revealed two very bright eyes. A glance and he was back at his task.

De Croteau's love for horses led his gaze to the riding and pack animals; and he slightly pursed his lips as if inclined to whistle his surprize. The riding-animal was an ordinary McKinney roan, but the other, although well heaped with packages of merchandise, displayed the points of a superior animal. It impressed de Croteau as being incongruous that such a horse should be consigned to do the work of a beast of burden.

NOW the Crakes were greeting loudly. Corn picked up a mouth-organ and began playing it weirdly, his eyes closed in ecstasy, a bare foot patting out the time. Eliza, with a touch of color surprizing her sallow cheeks, coquettishly draped a few yards of gay stuff over her shoulder and watched her husband to note the effect. The children circled about de Croteau, babbling incoherently of the treasures the one-armed man had brought.

"I'm Owen Glint, pedler of dry-goods and notions," spoke up the pedler. "You'll be having need of something for your women folks?"

"I've no kin to buy for," de Corteau replied.

"Lawk, Corn Crake! You ain't no more bringin'-up then a hawg. Mr. Glint, this is Mr. de Croteau, our neighbor. Lives t'other side Wolf Crick, not more'n a right smart walk an' one sit-down from here. Mr. de Croteau, did you ever in all your mortal life see sich 'mazin' dress stuff?

"Madison County Crake, you keep your paws off'n the gen'leman's stuff or I'll lambaste you most vastly! Polk County, you hyper into the house an' drive that dawg out. Jump!"

The excited faces of the children made an instant appeal to de Croteau. He requested that the various packages be opened. The stock of goods seemed to be a poor selection, as it consisted of many toys as well as dry-goods. To empty a pack in that sparsely settled country a pedler should carry the more essential things.

However, the assortment permitted of an easy choice for de Croteau, and he recklessly purchased gewgaws and jimcracks until he had materially lightened the pack-horse's load. He picked out several bolts of riotous dress-goods and dazed Eliza by presenting them to her.

The poor creature for once was speechless. She sat with her treasures piled in her lap, her thin arms clutching them as if fearing some one might rob her.

The effect on the children was entirely different from what de Croteau had anticipated. Their frenzied cries were stilled. Each, surrounded by his generous allotment, sat in silence, incapable of uttering a word. The unreality of it benumbed them. Not until Hawkins County timidly thrust forward a soiled finger and tentatively touched a trumpet and discovered that it was no dream did the reservoirs of their deeps boil over.

Above the resulting babel of perfect joy mounted the voice of the father. He was lamenting—

"It's a master organ, mister, but I ain't got no hard money, nor no furs.

De Croteau took the hint and supplied the want, and then said to Glint—

"That's a likely-looking horse, the led one."

Glint removed a string from his mouth and answered:

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"Yes. I got her at a bargain. I'd ride her, but she won't behave under a saddle."

"Blessed day the sheruff chased you to these parts, Mr. de Croteau!" sobbed Eliza.

Her husband interrupted a lively dance tune to drive an elbow into her thin chest and glare a warning. The pedler smiled and cocked his head like a bird and affably confessed:

"I've done some running myself before this. And from sheriffs, too."

"It's no secret about me," spoke up de Croteau. "I shot a man in self-defense and had to run for it."

"And no law officer can ever snake him outer Wolf Crick bottom!" loudly declared Crake.

"I hope not," said Glint. "And be sure if any officer is ever foolish enough to try it it'll be a two-handed officer, not a cripple.

"My good friends, who are your neighbors? If you'll set me on the right path I may be able to dispose of all my stock. But I can't expect to find another generous customer like Mr. de Croteau."

"The Rodneys is most likely to have some money, an' they're the nighest," eagerly Eliza informed him. "You Hawkins County Crake, you git cl'ar that hoss' feet afore he fetches you a bust.

"You foller the path to the crick, then cross an' keep goin' straight. You can't miss it. The left hand turn follers up the crick to Mr. de Croteau's place. You'll bed here tonight, of course. You can sleep with Madison County, him bein' the most quietest."

"Or you can put up at my place," offered de Croteau, surprized to find himself interested in the pedler. "That is, if you don't mind sleeping in a cabin that's known to be haunted."

"Land of Zion! Don't speak of old Gad's ha'nt!" shivered Eliza. "He mayn't 'a' troubled you yet, but no knowin' when he will."

Glint laughed softly and with a wink of his bird-like eye at de Croteau said:

"I'm a firm believer in ghosts. But I understand them so well, and they know me so well, I don't mind their company. I wouldn't be surprized, Mr. de Croteau, if I called on you this evening and spread my blankets on your floor."

De Croteau offered—

"If you're bound for the Rodney cabin I'll show you the way—part of the way."

"I thank you. But these good folks have asked me to have a bite to eat with them and I think I'll stay here and rest till after supper. Look for me this evening. Thank you for your trade, sir."

De Croteau walked back to the cabin, glad to know the pedler was coming. He was more hungry for human companionship than he had realized. Glint both interested him and puzzled him.

The man's speech and reserve bespoke a grade of intelligence far above that of Wolf Creek people. His trick of making his strong teeth serve for the missing hand was evidence of his resourcefulness and an indomitable will-power.

De Croteau cooked an extra portion of venison and left it covered on the hearth to keep warm should his guest bring an appetite from the Crake table. Eating his own supper, he sat in the doorway and smoked his pipe.

The night was quiet, with scarcely a breath of air stirring. The pipe was finished and refilled. He was disappointed that the pedler should be late in arriving. Then he recalled the Crakes' fear of the cabin after sundown and began to fear Glint had lost his way in attempting unescorted, to find the path. To settle the doubt he walked down the path a way and listened for the sound of the two horses.

From out of the night came the report of a firearm. If it were a rifle it was far off. Two more reports, faint like the first, followed. He listened for the clamor of dogs, the accompaniment to a coon-hunt, but this familiar note was lacking. Finally convinced that Glint had been induced to spend the night at the Crake cabin, de Croteau returned and retired.

HIS sense of time told him it lacked a little of midnight when he woke up. Something had aroused him. He had grown accustomed to the sounds of night-prowling animals and no longer gave them heed. The alarm must have been something different.

He waited a minute. Red Shot set up a loud whinny. Seizing his revolvers, he slipped from the cabin and stole rapidly to the small grass field where his horse grazed. Thieves would have hard work to get the animal without betraying their presence.

De Croteau whistled softly and cocked a gun. A crashing through the bushes

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advertised the coming of Red Shot. He quickly located his master and rested his muzzle against the bare arm and waited to be petted.

De Croteau's attention was now taken up with a sound in the creek trail above him. To make sure he was not mistaken, he dropped and rested his ear on the ground.

After a bit he heard a *thud, thud,* as if horses were passing over a strip of rock. There were at least two animals. Once more he caught the sound, but it was farther away and very faint.

"False alarm, old boy" he murmured to his horse. "Some of the gang riding to the Knob. Deviltry on foot. Probably will be after me to join in."

Going back to the cabin, he managed to dismiss his forebodings and fall asleep. Again he was awakened. He could locate no untoward noise; and yet he felt that some one was, or had been, close to the cabin. It was entirely different from the impression the first alarm had given him.

With guns ready he stole to the door. For five minutes he remained tensely attentive. Down the creek path came the snapping of a dead branch. He had no way of knowing whether it came from a clumsy footfall or from the activity of some night animal. This time he did not go forth to investigate.

When he next opened his eyes the sun was dispelling the mists from the bottoms. He took his pail and went to the spring for water, and on the way came to a halt before a small dark splotch on the dead leaves of a bough. He investigated with a twig and decided the sign was fresh.

"Blood," he muttered with a little shudder. "Some creature must have made a kill. Tragedy everywhere."

He visited his horse, and then took time to cook his breakfast. He collected his few dishes and was about to take them to the creek to wash them when he was astounded to behold Francine Rodney standing before the open door. Her face was drawn and white.

"Miss Rodney! What's the matter?" he cried.

"Matter?" she repeated, fighting to control herself. "Why, nothing very serious is the matter."

"You look as if you'd met old Gad's ghost," he blurted out, still wondering if the dark circles under her eyes signified a prolonged weeping spell.

"I'm tired. Very tired," she listlessly replied. "My father is sick—oh, nothing serious. Rheumatism, I think. His trip in the hills wore on him. I've come to see if you have any whisky."

"Whisky? Yes, a jug of it. Crake brought it after I told him not to bother. Whisky was a poor friend to me once, and I will not forget. I'll fetch it."

"A little will do."

"I haven't anything to put it in. Take the jug. I'll carry it over for you."

"No, no," she hurriedly refused. "That is—my father is nervous. Strangers irritate him."

"Of course. I don't blame him. I'll carry it part of the way."

She agreed to this with a little nod and he brought out the jug of "blue ruin." When she turned sidewise her profile looked pinched. She attempted to smile, but it was a failure. Without a word she started down the trail, walking very rapidly. When they reached the point where the path from Crake's crossed the creek she halted, thrust out her hand for the jug and said:

"Don't bother to come farther, please. It's very good of you."

"Hope it will help him. But if it's rheumatism perhaps Mrs. Crake can make him something from herbs that would be much better than whisky."

"Perhaps. I'll ask her," was the weary reply as she walked up the path.

De Croteau was puzzled now that he had time to think connectedly. To seek help for her father was most natural, but to come to him at such an early hour was most surprizing. Rheumatic pains, while disagreeable enough, were not, he understood, sufficiently dangerous as to demand emergency treatment. And he knew it must have been very distasteful for her to come to him at all.

He would have expected Francine to wait until Eliza showed up on her daily visit and have used her or her husband as a messenger. And if it was whisky Francine's father needed she must have known that that was one article Corn Crake could readily provide. From whatever angle he viewed the incident he was baffled.

With no plans for the day, but hoping the pedler would drop in and relieve the tedium, he filled in the time with sweeping

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the cabin. Having finished, he discarded the brush-broom and made him a fresh one of stout twigs and brushed down the low walls. Thanks to the girl's occupancy of the place, he had only his own clutter to eliminate.

Finally he despaired of receiving any call from Glint and decided on a ride. Repairing to the natural paddock above the cabin, he called Red Shot, and without bothering to saddle him sprang upon his back and sent him flying up the creek toward the Knob.

Red Shot needed the exercise. He behaved much like a foolish horse, jumping from side to side and rearing until he threatened to fall over backward on his rider. Between these mischievous pranks he would turn his head as if wishing to note the effect on his master.

De Croteau let him have his own way until they reached the walnut opening where he had been arraigned on the charge of killing Black Dawley. Bringing the animal to an unwilling standstill, de Croteau came out of his abstraction and gazed thoughtfully at the ground. There were hoofprints of two horses, and he was recalling the sounds of the night.

DISMOUNTING, he kneeled by the signs and observed how they had collected moisture. There was no questioning their freshness. He straightened, and vaguely speculated what errand could take two men on a midnight ride to Devil Knob. He fervently hoped it did not presage the maturing of Bender's big plan for a ride across the border. This fear caused him to follow the signs in a hope that he would find them circling back to the south without having left the opening.

The tracks turned and skirted the creek, seemed to have come to a halt—as a confusion of the marks testified—then resumed an irregular course. But on turning back from the creek they separated and seemed to wander at haphazard as if the riders had become confused by the darkness. They came together and drew apart. At last he was impressed by a difference in the appearance of the hoof-prints. From the time they turned away from the creek they were more shallow.

"Men got off at the creek and walked," he mused. "Probably led their nags; but how could they miss the path? I could follow it; and I've been over it but once in the daytime. They might be bothered if they were strangers, but strangers wouldn't be making for the Knob at night."

There was nothing momentous in the problem; but the mental exercise of seeking a solution kept his thoughts from other topics. Next he made a discovery which intrigued his liveliest attention. In a small marshy area, where the two animals' trail was very plainly modeled, was the imprint of a man's booted foot. But there was the track of only one man.

To clear up this point de Croteau cast about in a circle to find traces of the second man. He was unsuccessful and returned to make a more minute study of the hoof-prints. The two sets were of equal depths; neither of the horses had had a rider when crossing the marsh. The signs left by the man eliminated Crake and any of his class, for they would not put on any foot-covering so long as the mild weather continued. With increased zest he pursued his investigation and again found the boot-prints, one set; and this time they were making south and were not accompanied by any hoof-prints.

"Where'n the —— could rider number two have gone to?" he asked himself.

Ignoring the horses, he now sought the trail of the man. He picked it up at the mouth of the path, still making south. He ran down the path several hundred feet, with Red Shot at his heels, and came upon it again. In entering the opening he had blindly ridden over it. But there was no trace of the horses returning down the path.

Summed up: Two men had ridden north toward the Knob at midnight. At the opening both had dismounted, but there was evidence of only one reaching the ground. The horses had not returned; one man had.

Never doubting that the explanation was very simple, could he find it, he mounted Red Shot and galloped back to the opening to satisfy his persistent desire to know the truth. He had omitted a test which might explain everything: one man had returned down the creek, the second had gone on to the Knob with the horses. If he found a trace of tracks north of the opening, either of a man, or of a horse carrying a rider, it would be immaterial what the marshy spots failed to show. The absence of the second man's tracks in the opening would only be negative evidence.

He soon picked up the trail north of the

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opening—two horses walking, neither carrying a rider. But search as he would he could not find a second set of man tracks.

"According to all the evidence which my powers of analysis can furnish, t'other chap flew up into the sky," he told Red Shot. "Yes, sir, boy! Jumped plumb up into the sky and hid behind a cloud. He had to do that, or—jump into the crick."

In expressing the alternative his grim humor vanished, and he turned and stared at the creek from under scowling brows. There was the sign back of his cabin which he had diagnosed as being made by blood.

He started for the creek, for the point where he had noticed the two horses had halted. Red Shot whinnied and was answered from a low oak ridge north of the opening. De Croteau stayed his advance and loosened a revolver.

After a few minutes' wait he was startled to behold two riderless animals bursting into view. They were the pedler's horses; and de Croteau waited for Glint to put in an appearance. The packhorse carried no packs. The McKinney roan was without a saddle. The two came on slowly, pausing to snatch mouthfuls of blue-stem grass.

"Glint's made a camp. But why do that instead of stopping with me? Why up here away from the cabins?" mused de Croteau aloud.

The roan suddenly pricked up his ears, as if having decided he would be a good fellow, and galloped briskly forward. As he awkwardly pranced about Red Shot and kept clear of the latter's gleaming teeth de Croteau's eyes opened very wide and he stared at a dark splotch on the animal's back.

Without further pause for reasoning he was convinced that it would be a waste of time to seek the pedler alive. His hand went to his revolver and he glared at the edge of the woods, expecting to behold Glint's murderers. He felt faint and giddy as came the associated thought that he himself was held by Bender to be a member of the ruthless game.

"—— 'em," he whispered. "They'll even kill cripples."

He waited ten minutes, and no one came to claim the animals.

Crying out against his stupidity, he made direct for the bank of the creek. One man had committed the crime, and his tracks showed his flight down the path. There were no assassins in the woods above the opening. Coming to the spot where the horses had stopped, he threw himself on the ground at the edge of the steep bank and studied the sharp slope.

At last he decided that there was one section of the bank where for the width of ten feet the earth of the bank had been freshly disturbed. It commenced a few feet below the top of the bank and extended in a nearly straight course down into the dark waters of the creek.

Fascinated by the very gruesomeness of his suspicion, de Croteau remained for some minutes staring into the stream. Far upstream the creek brawled noisily. Downstream it was checked by a natural dam. Opposite de Croteau's position the current was sluggish and the waters formed a deep pool.

Resolved to learn the truth, de Croteau cut a stout sapling and trimmed off the branches. Cautiously working his way down the bank, he secured a foothold and began poking the pole into the water. He felt it hit something which was not a rock—something hard, yet which yielded. Either a water-soaked log or—what?

HE LIFTED on the pole and felt something following it to the surface. Trembling with excitement, also with a dread of what he might behold, he made a final effort, and his strange catch broke the surface. With a nervous cry he jerked the pole and the object sank back into the dark depths. He had had a clear view of it, however; a saddle, stained dark in spots, and with pieces of rope hitched to it.

Recovering his nerve, he plunged the pole back and resumed his strange fishing. Once more the end of the sapling caught in something which yielded and which he felt coming up to the surface. He gritted his teeth and persevered. While still under water he glimpsed it—a long grayish object.

With an involuntary cry he started back, lost his balance and all but fell into the creek. The pole dropped into the water and was drawn under by its grisly anchor, then slipped from under the loop of rope and floated down toward the dam.

De Croteau scrambled up the bank panting furiously, his body bathed in sweat. For all the wealth of Missouri he would not have continued his investigation and learned

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what the long gray roll contained. Glint the pedler had brought his goods to a sorry market.

De Croteau was anxious to leave the spot. He sent Red Shot along at a mad pace until well down the creek path, when he controlled his nerves. He found one phase of the murder difficult to understand: Why were two horses, one of them a valuable animal, left to wander about the country and proclaim the crime? Why should desirable booty be ignored?

He was still appalled by the cold-bloodedness of it all when he reached the place he called home. It was nearing sunset, and until he noticed the long shadows cast by the trees he did not realize how much time he had consumed in his four-mile ride.

That his experience had unstrung him was proved when he jumped convulsively on hearing a loud call from the opposite side of the creek. It was Crake desiring an audience, and de Croteau on sighting him feared that he was gazing at the pedler's murderer. As he walked to the creek and saw that Crake was barefooted he began to doubt his involuntary suspicion.

"I jest 'bout hooted my derned head off," Crake complained. "Come over here."

"If you want to talk with me you'll come over here," de Croteau answered.

"You needn't snap a body's head off," retorted Crake. "I've stood here 'most a year, I 'low, a-hollering like all git-out, and a-playing my new mouth-organ till all the drum and catfish in the crick was dancing on their tails. Little Madison County swallered nigh on a pint of them colored beads, but 'Liza grabbed him by the heels and shook most of 'em out of him.

"Seen seven snakes coming down here, and I don't figger it's a right smart day for snakes at that. Shows we'll have a open Winter s'long as they don't den up. Reckon I'll wade across and have a snort of your prime blue ruin."

"Reckon you won't," growled de Croteau. "I told you not to bring it. I poured it out."

"Good Gawdfrey! Poured out a gallon of as good rye as ever greased a man's weazand? Why, I could 'a' took that and my new mouth-organ and got 'lected to the General Assembly! 'Low I won't come over.

"Say, mister, I was forgitting my business. When did the one-armed pedler leave your cabin this morning?"

"He hasn't been here, so he didn't leave it," replied de Croteau, watching Crake narrowly.

The fellow's simple face was a study in bewilderment; and de Croteau did not believe he was capable of dissimulating. On the spot he absolved Crake of having any hand in the pedler's death.

"Not come here?" cried Crake. "Then when in sin did he go, and where is he now?"

This explosive query put de Croteau on the defensive. He was remembering the suspicion fastened on him after Black Dawley's death.

"He never came here. I supposed he had changed his mind and was staying with you. Pedlers usually come and go as they please."

"I know," mumbled Crake, still wrestling with surprize. "But from something he said me and my woman 'lowed he was cur'ous to meet up with Knife Bender. I told him as how you belonged, and he let on he was coming here to see you.

"He started for your cabin last night. I swow he said he was going to stop here. He quit us after he'd e't a snack. He took both his horses.

"He must 'a' been planning to come here, for 'Liza offered to show him the way to the Rodney cabin. He reckoned he'd see the Rodneys in the daytime when his goods would show up better. And, of course, 'Liza wa'n't keen to show him the way up here, it being darker'n the inside of my best b'ar dawg."

"He'll show up some time," said de Croteau, inwardly shivering at the prophecy in his speech. "And I can't stand here chinning with you any longer."

"I'll go back and tell 'Liza. Most gumfounded thing that ever happened on this crick! Man and two hosses start out in the dark and don't arrive anywhere."

"He may have changed his mind and gone to the Rodneys."

"No; 'Liza was over as far as the door this morning to borrer some thread so she could make up some new dresses out the stuff you bought her. No pedler there, and old man Rodney is sick with rumity pains. Mr. de Croteau—" and the speaker's voice sank to a shaky whisper—"any chance of his making for here and being caught by old Gad's ha'nt?"

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"I don't think so," de Croteau soberly answered. "And if the ghost did get him what got his two horses?"

"Dawgone! That shows what book-l'arning does to make a man keen. I never thought of them hosses."

CHAPTER VII

THE SICK MAN

THE one-armed pedler was much with de Croteau that night. Once he woke up and thought the dead man was lying on the floor until he had cleared his muddled senses and found it was only a shadow in the white moonlight.

He was up at sunrise, eager to get away from the place for a while. Having eliminated Crake from the crime, he found time to consider his own position and was worried by the belief that the horses up the creek were a menace to him. He was continually picturing some of the settlers finding the horses, and then learning the secret of the deep pool. Another scene he unwillingly rehearsed was the coming of men to surround the cabin and accuse him of the crime.

Bolting his bacon and bread, he saddled Red Shot. He had planned to ride north and find and drive the horses farther away. It had appealed to him as being feasible and sensible to do this.

Now that he faced the task he feared the risk of being seen while thus engaged. Such a discovery would be tantamount to a confession. They would be grazing along the path to Devil Knob, and some of Bender's men might be passing over it at any hour.

One thing he did try to do, however, was to find the stained bough back of the cabin. He was unsuccessful. He worried over his failure, fearing some sharp eyes might observe it and deduce that Glint had been done to death by him there at the cabin. Common sense in vain argued that there was not one chance in a million for the small dark splotch to be observed; that he himself had been unable to locate it. And yet had any one approached the cabin that morning he would have been extremely apprehensive lest the stain be found. Had he planned and committed the murder such a remote possibility could not have disturbed his peace of mind more.

He started to ride to Crake's place and felt impelled to turn about and proceed up the creek path. He followed this impulse for a quarter of a mile, then took fright at a rustling in the bushes and galloped back to the cabin. He forded the creek and carried out his original plan of visiting Crake.

He found his neighbor seated before the cabin, playing his mouth-organ. Eliza, de Croteau was informed, was paying an early morning call at the Rodney cabin.

"I 'low that that man Rodney's got dumb ague," lazily added Crake, rising and kicking the wheel of dogs away from the horse. "My woman was over there yesterday. She says the girl is fair upsot over her pap. She's carried over sort of a drink made from yarbs. Buckshot Baker's back."

"Back from where?"

"Lawd! As if I'd ask him! Back from jabbering with the devil, mos' likely. Oh, mister, don't you breathe a yip of that! They say he once skinned a man alive for saying less'n that. He's been gone some days."

"On the gang's business probably," said de Croteau.

"Or on Baker's business," muttered Crake, his eyes darting about nervously. "Folks beginning to talk 'bout the peddler. Yes, sir! Bill Sawney, who lives over on Pea Vine Ridge, was hoping the peddler would tote his goods over thataway so's the women folks could see 'em. Queer where he went to."

"Queer that he could go anywhere with two horses and not be seen by some one," admitted de Croteau.

"Funny you never see him near your cabin."

"Curse it, blockhead! How could I see him if he wasn't there?" wrathfully cried de Croteau.

"That's what I meant," hastily explained Crake. "Queer he didn't go there after saying he was. There's them what would do for him for what money he'd be carrying. But Bender's ag'in any sich business being worked here at home even on strangers. If any our boys done it, then they done it ag'in Bender's rules, and he's a bad man to cross. He's a master-hand to have his orders carried out. That McKinney roan the pedler rode wa'n't worth much, but t'other was a right smart critter.

"Then ag'in Bender don't want no ugly stories leaking down into Arkansas 'bout pedlers dropping out of sight on Wolf

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Creek. That would stop pedlers from coming here, and our women folks don't git much chance to trade for store fixings and are always honing to. Jest like Injun squaws that way. They don't see much fun in raising a crap in Summer jest to eat it up in Winter. Even if we men git a smart sprinkle of fur it don't do no good 'less we can trade it for goods.

"Say, mister; that rifle of mine what was 'witched is a mighty fine gun now. Shot a bald eagle with it t'other day.

"Light and squat. Don't wear your hoss out."

"No, thanks. I'm riding around a bit."

"Wait'll I dig Hawkins County out from under the cabin and send him after his brothers to play at the crick and I'll go with you."

De Croteau preferred being alone, but believed Crake had had orders to spy upon him. Having attended to his offspring, Crake took his rifle and lounged along at Red Shot's side. He maintained a rambling monolog on a variety of subjects. De Croteau waited until he was out of breath and then asked:

"Where does Bender live? Thought I'd go and call on him."

"Bender live? You call on him?" gasped Crake. "Great land! He's here, and he's there. But it's mortal bad luck for the man who goes hunting for him. Call on Knife Bender? That's good!

"Mr. de Croteau, you jest keep low and let him happen in on *you*. When he wants to see a man he looks him up."

De Croteau pressed for details. Crake reluctantly confided:

"He lives up on the edge of the hills. If any of us know where his cabin is we don't blab about it, and we don't go within rifle-shot of it. No, sir! We'll die fast 'nough when our day comes. We don't go jamming and crowding into no grave.

"Bender's a queer cuss. He tells the men that Devil Knob's the place to do business. We take the hint mighty smart. I 'low he wants one place where he don't have to figger on how to act if any one comes along. Not to put too strong a p'int on it, I 'low he'd shoot on sight if any of us went nosing round his cabin. Yes, sir!"

This was de Croteau's first intimation that the desperado preferred seclusion. They rode toward Gainesville and met two settlers, one at a time, and both eagerly inquired about Glint, and expressed the hope he would call at their cabins before selling out his stock.

These two encounters taught de Croteau how rapidly news was passed in that region. Not only did these men know that the pedler was on Wolf Creek, but they also knew that he was missing.

When they reached the bank of the Big North Fork of the White, Crake urged his companion to visit the sawmill on Lick Creek, where, he declared, they could obtain some whisky. De Croteau promptly refused. Crake was disgruntled and would have set off alone if it had not been for his orders to keep with de Croteau.

"We've come far enough. I'm going back," said de Croteau.

"Ride all the way home without a mild snort of licker?" protested Crake. "I swow, but you do r'ile me most mortal."

De Croteau turned his horse. Crake called on him to stop; but Red Shot was brought to a standstill only when it was added:

"It's Bender. He's waving his hand for us to hold up."

DE CROTEAU glanced up-stream, and was surprized to behold the outlaw coming down their side of the fork at a gallop, his big horse covering the ground rapidly but awkwardly. As he rode the man's head wagged from side to side as if unevenly balanced.

De Croteau greeted him with a curt nod. Crake shuffled his bare feet uneasily and ducked his head.

Bender's eyes were baleful as a cat's as he surveyed the two for a moment in silence. Then his whining voice complained—

"What ye doin' over this far, de Croteau?"

"Riding. You told me to move about and meet folks."

"That's so. What d'ye know 'bout a one-armed feller?"

De Croteau's thin lips tightened.

"Nothing. Except he called himself Glint and was a pedler, and had two horses, a McKinney roan and a likely riding-horse he was using for a pack-animal."

"*Was* a pedler? *Was* usin'?" softly queried Bender, his eyes opening and closing. "How d'ye know he ain't a pedler now, and *is* usin'?"

"I don't," readily answered de Croteau,

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confused but managing to keep his face immobile. Then he explained:

"I saw him but once. I speak of him as he was then. I suppose he still calls himself Glint and is a pedler. What of it?"

"Dad burn! That's the idee! What of it? Nothin' of it 'cept he's dropped out of sight, hosses, packs and all."

"Crake was asking about him," said de Croteau. "It was at Crake's cabin that he as much as decided to spend the night with me. That was two nights ago. He didn't show up. I suppose he moved on to where trade is likely. I bought a lot of truck from him at the Crake cabin, and perhaps he had no time to waste on one who was no longer a customer."

"Jest where did ye see him last, Crake?"

The question was softly put, but the effect on Crake was marked. He dug his bare toes into the dirt and his big face registered great fear as he answered:

"When he took his hosses in the evening after having a snack with us, he struck out for the crick. He was 'lowing to go to de Croteau's cabin. That's the last squint I had of him. My woman will swear it's the truth, and Madison County and Hawkins County and Polk County will swear the same. I didn't budge from the cabin that night."

"And ye'd better tell me the truth, ye big dog. Ever catch ye in a lie and I'll cut yer tongue out. That places him on the road to your place, de Croteau."

"I've told you once he never arrived, that I never saw him except the once at the Crake place," retorted de Croteau. "Don't harp on that any more."

Crake groaned at this temerity. Bender's twisted face took on an ugly grin.

"De Croteau," said Bender, "ye're goin' to make a good man for me. That is, after ye've been trimmed smooth round the corners a trifle. But if he never was at yer cabin his hosses was. They've been found feedin' within a few rods of yer place within the last two hours, and there's blood marks on the roan's back. Word was sent to me by Baker."

"I'm not herding the pedler's horses. If he isn't caring for them I suppose they're apt to wander anywhere. The horses were not there when I saddled and left the place this morning. As for the blood, I never let it out. I don't fight one-armed strangers."

"There's more in this then jest puttin' a strange pedler out the way," growled Bender. "I didn't understand jest what it meant till Baker got back this mornin' or I'd been busy yesterday. Baker knew the pedler, but not by the name of Glint. The man's comin' here was mighty 'portant, Baker says. 'Portant for all of us.

"A call's been sent out for the whole gang to meet at the Knob tomorrer night. Crake'll call for ye. Be there."

De Croteau nodded and lifted his reins. It was his third opportunity to repudiate the gang, but this time he kept silent from other than a personal reason. Bender checked him by saying:

"Now ye're so near Gainesville and nothin' better to do, ye'n Crake can go there and ask 'bout Glint. L'arn if he's been there. Either me or Baker'll call on ye afore ye sleep."

"We're going. We'll hustle. We'll go full team ahead. We'll go over that place with a riddance-comb," loudly assured Crake.

Bender dismissed them with a wave of his bony hand and walked his mount into the bushes. De Croteau's face burned. It hurt him keenly to be ordered about by a scarecrow of an outlaw. However, he suspected that there were more things to be asked of him, dastardly things; then would be time enough to make the last stand.

Directing Crake to lead the way, he rode along behind him, his mood sullenly resentful. After a while his thoughts drifted from self to Wolf Creek, and he found himself wondering when Rodney would be called to the Knob. Then he remembered that Rodney was ill and could scarce make the trip.

Since the discovery of the pedler's body in the creek he had thought of Francine Rodney only at odd moments. Now he took time to recall her wan face as it had appeared when she sought him in the early morning. As upon his former meditation over the incident he could discover nothing to enlighten his bewilderment.

He was aroused from his hopeless speculations by Crake's doleful lament:

"Everything was hunky-dory till that Buckshot Baker came moseying back. First shot out the gun he stirs the chief up. ——'s to pay.

"By cracky, that Baker will bristle up to me once too often some day. I'll oil my guns when I git back home. I'll make

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buzzard-meat of him in jest one flicker of my knife."

But he glanced nervously about him as he spoke to make sure no alien ears had overheard his threat.

De Croteau plunged back into his gloomy thoughts and did not emerge until they were on the outskirts of Gainesville. It was a small place, but he was averse to entering it. The Green County sheriff would not rest contented until he had captured his man. Discretion had impelled him to turn back from Wolf Creek, but he would try again and again. De Croteau knew the type.

By this time he undoubtedly had passed along word to all settlements requesting the detention of Jefferson de Croteau. Nor would descriptions of his person be lacking. De Croteau dismounted and said to Crake:

"You go ahead and look about. I'll stick here."

"Chief said the two of us was to go in and look," Crake reminded him.

"Be quick about it. I shan't wait long," replied de Croteau.

CRAKE loped off to the settlement, marveling that a man could dare to neglect carrying out every jot and tittle of Knife Bender's orders. De Croteau stretched himself on the grass and smoked his pipe and kept a keen eye on the road leading across the border into Arkansas.

An hour passed, and he began to fear Crake had been captured, that he must prosecute a search for the man regardless of all danger. Then Crake came into sight, slightly unsteady and reeking of rum.

"Lawdy, but they do have strong licker back there," he puffed. "Got my skinful. Got a letter from the post-office. Name of Crake's on it. Made me take it, but they can't make me read it, 'cause I can't read."

De Croteau stepped on a bare foot and aroused him to attention.

"The pedler?" he demanded. "Any news of him?"

"Nary a word. I'm going to sleep. I'll cut the heart outer the man what hits my feet."

"And I'm riding for Wolf Creek and will tell Bender you send word that you'll be in when you get good and ready. Good-by."

"Oh, good Lawd! Not that! Wait. Jest let me hang to your stirrup for a mile 'n' I'll be all hunky.

The return trip was made in this fashion and at a faster pace than the first half had been. When they arrived at the cabin Crake was panting and puffing, but quite sober. He threw himself on the ground and fell asleep. Eliza came from the cabin, wringing and tossing her hands, while the children kept at a distance and howled most dolorously.

"What's the matter?" asked De Croteau.

"Thieves is the matter! Low-down houn' thieves," she moaned. "They've been here an' turned our cabin upside down. Must 'a' done it while I was at Rodney's an' the children was playin' at the crick."

"What have they taken?"

"Oh, it ain't what they've tooken! Leastwise, I don't seem to miss nawthin'. At first I 'lowed my best skillet was gone, but Hawkins County had it under the cabin, a-playin' he was pap an' a-makin' blue ruin. No; nawthin ain't gone. But to think of low, o'nary thieves comin' to Wolf Crick!"

De Croteau rode for home, leaving her to pound her husband's feet so that he might awake and learn of the mysterious visitation. Reaching his cabin and turning his horse loose, de Croteau entered and knew, the moment he crossed the threshold, that some one had been there during his absence. His few belongings had been overhauled.

He wondered if his errand to Gainesville had been improvised to permit of a secret search. Some effort had been made to leave his property as it had been found, but there was no mistaking the presence of an intruder. The rough cupboard had been ransacked, and even the chimney investigated, as was shown by the layer of soot in the fireplace.

He scouted around the cabin and made sure that no one was spying on him, then examined his hiding-place by the hearth. His money was intact. Like the Crakes he had suffered no loss from the trespass.

"They must suspect Crake and me," he decided.

Somehow he had expected to find a better grade of intelligence in Bender. The man, while unwholesome to look at and beyond all doubt a cold-blooded beast, possessed much natural shrewdness which supplied the want of sophistication.

"Baker's at the bottom of it," he suddenly concluded. "He knew Glint, and he'll move the hills to find out who killed him—if he ever learns for a certainty the

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fellow's dead. Their relations must have been important."

He had no particular fear that the homicide would be fastened on to him even if the body were found. He still relied on Bender's common sense. But if Baker was in earnest Bender would not stop until he had placed the blame on some one.

Perhaps it was only a game of Baker's to get him, de Croteau, out of the way. Assassination from the bush might no longer be feasible now that the victim had been accepted as a member of the gang.

Baker was indirect in his methods; witness the arraignment for Black Dawley's death. Baker had instigated that, although not believing the accused was guilty. His purpose now might be devious.

De Croteau knew of no one along the creek whom the man would plot against except the girl. Instantly a half-formed fear pounded on his mind for recognition, and he wondered if the black shadow of the dead man was to reach down the creek and fall across the path of Francine Rodney.

He had no appetite for supper. He demanded action. With fierce contempt for Bender's possible disapproval he belted on his guns and walked at random through the soft dusk. He splashed through the shallow creek and followed paths which would be new to him in the sunlight. It was quite dark when he emerged from his deep abstraction and found himself contemplating the fitful gleam of a tallow candle. He was close to a cabin, but for a few moments he could not locate himself. Then a shrill adjuration for Madison County Crake to go to sleep and stop asking questions about dead men or be "busted" over his small head, gave him his bearings.

He was turning away, trying to remember what it was he was missing, something which characterized the Crake cabin, when a mighty baying of dogs down the creek informed him. He had noted their absence without being conscious of the fact. The dogs came on and broke through the last of the bushes, an undulating dark patch.

Behind them ran another figure. The animals swung up to the cabin and circled de Croteau, showing neither hostility nor favor, yet jumping and barking with staccato insistence. Eliza came to the door and shrilly warned:

"If you're after my man he ain't here. An' I've got a rifle gun an' can use it."

Crake burst through the circle of dogs and hurt his bare toes in kicking them aside.

" 'Liza Crake, duck back into that cabin," he wrathfully yelled. "But don't lock me out. Old Gad's ha'nt is back on the creek ag'in."

WITH a squeal of terror Eliza slammed the door and dropped the bar. Crake assaulted it mightily. De Croteau gained his side, touched his arm and invited—

"Suppose you tell me about it."

With a howl of terror Crake attempted to leap away, but the door was now swung open by the woman and he tumbled across the threshold and reclined on his back. By the candle-light he recognized his neighbor, and with an oath struggled to a sitting posture.

"Don't ever tech me when I ain't 'specting it," he cried. "Lawd! It's a wonder you ain't a dead man with my knife in your gullet! Lucky you wa'n't at home. I went down within hooting distance of your place. And I seen it!

"Lawd, how skeered the dawgs was! As good a team of b'ar dawgs ez thar is in all Missouri! I had to run faster'n a rabbit keeping ahead of a harrycane to fetch along with 'em.

"Only a ha'nt can skeer 'em like that. I won't go near there ag'in 'cept in daylight, for all the hard money in the North."

"You saw what?" impatiently asked de Croteau, seizing a brawny shoulder and shaking the man savagely.

"I seen the ha'nt! Stop pestering me. Think I'd take a back-track for anything human? I seen old Gad's ha'nt, I tell you. I heard it a-moaning and a-honing for to find the rope it hung hisself with. And some derned fool burned the rope to keep witches off and now there ain't no way to drive that ha'nt off the crick."

"What did you want of me?"

"Jest to pass the news. Baker thought my dawgs could find some trail up along the crick. Did you know Baker found the pedler's packs hid in the woods? Yes, siree! The dawgs sniffed out the packs, then tried to swim the crick. You see they was smelling the ha'nt and was keen to git back here.

"Oh, Lawd, Lawd! I know the truth now. It wa'n't old Gad's ha'nt. 'Twas the pedler's! We got two ha'nts on the crick 'stead of one! You come in and shet that

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cussed door and we'll give you a shake-down till morning."

"I must be going back. I have a charm against ha'nts," said de Croteau bruskly; and he patted one of his belt guns.

As he hastened down the path, deaf to Crake's frantic warnings, he believed he had seen the ha'nt before, and he feared it was in trouble and needed assistance. So instead of taking the path to his cabin he turned into the one leading to the Rodney place.

He was not surprized to behold a slim figure outlined in the open door. The sound of his steps brought the door to, with the figure on the outside.

"It's de Croteau, Miss Rodney," he called out.

The figure ran to meet him and he hurriedly added:

"You've been to my cabin for help. You're in trouble. Crake told me he just saw a ghost at the cabin. I knew it must be you."

"Not so loud," she whispered, stifling a sob. "He's delirious at times, but he might hear us. Yes, I went there. You can't help any, but it did seem as if I must try to get help. I feel stronger now. I'm all right now."

De Croteau took her arm and half-led, half-dragged her to the light shining through a window. Her face looked pinched and ghastly. There was something worse than worry over a sick man in her staring eyes. He gently forced her to be seated on the edge of the porch and insisted:

"You're going over to the Crake cabin. I'll stay here with your father. Crake shall sleep outside and be ready to run errands for me, to take word to you if it's necessary."

"No."

The refusal was absolute, and the head that rested for a moment against the morning-glory vines was held erect.

"You must go. I need no help. My weakness has passed. I'm all right again. I was tired; I let down a bit. I became distracted. My woman's nerves.

"I had to walk. I went to your cabin. The walk did me good. Now I feel all right."

She tried to speak reassuringly and display the resilience of new strength, but for his ears the timbre of her voice held only fear. Even while she was speaking the sick man began talking. She clutched de Croteau's arm and commanded:

"Go! You *must* go. He's out of his head again. He seems to know if any stranger is here. It makes him worse. Even Mrs. Crake disturbs him."

While de Croteau hesitated the sick man's voice dropped to a rapid, monotonous recital made up of disconnected fragments. Each group of words made sense in itself; but between the groups were hiatuses. As the girl caught the drift of the rambling talk she relaxed her pressure on de Croteau's arm and sighed in what might be taken for deep relief. De Croteau soon discovered that the sick man was dwelling on various phases of his life, disjointed bits of information which left much to be supplied.

"Yes, sir. I came here barefooted. Carried my shoes in my hand. Not too proud to maul rails and stack posts and railing by the hundred. Northern enterprise, sir."

The voice dwindled down, and the girl whispered:

"He's often told me about it. Coming to Arkansas when a boy. Went barefooted to save his shoes, poor dear."

Now the sick man had reached another period of his life and was living over the days when he served as a schoolmaster. He called on boys and girls, long since dead, to rise and recite. He spoke sharply to the wayward and kindly to the slow of wit. With scarcely any pause to mark the transition he was a doctor, sitting by a sick-bed.

The girl's tense poise had quite relaxed and once more she leaned against the vines. In amazement at the man's persistence, in wonder at his crawling up from menial labor to positions of trust, to a plane of commercial importance, de Croteau patched the fragments of talk together. He learned how Jethuel Rodney had built boats and shod horses; had saved his money and had opened a store. He heard him glibly talking of transportation and freight, of insurance and underwriters, of profit and loss, of his work in the General Assembly, and his bright prospects of taking his seat in Congress.

And as de Croteau listened his face burned with shame at realizing how he, starting with every advantage that youth could ask for, should be outlawed as the result of a drunken frolic.

"Your father must have had a hard time. He must have been a very brave and a very smart man, Miss Rodney," he whispered, as the voice became silent.

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"My mother thought he was a wonderful man," she tenderly murmured. "Now he'll sleep, and you must go."

"First tell me I may call in the morning. You may want something done," he pleaded. "I won't come more than half-way up the path. You may wave me back if I'm not needed. If you'd let me watch by him tonight I should be very happy.

"I am everything your father has not been, and yet I'm not bad at heart, Miss Rodney. No man could have a better father and mother than I have; and yet it might have been better for me if I had had to go barefooted to save my shoes, to maul rails by the hundred. If life's been hard for your father it's been too easy for me. Tell me if I can't come half-way up the path in the morning?"

For the moment he was forgetting that Rodney was in hiding and that there must be some very urgent reason to send him and his daughter into the lonely Ozark country.

"If you come alone," she consented. "And I am thankful that that man Baker has gone away."

IT WAS on his tongue to inform her of Baker's return, but he checked the impulse. Her ignorance of the fact would perhaps permit her a night's rest. The morrow would be time enough to break bad news.

In making ready to leave her he took her hand, and she did not resent the natural act. As she stood with the light cutting across her profile she looked so wearied that his heart went out to her in pity, much as if she had been a little child.

Then with an abruptness that startled them convulsively and caused the girl to snatch away her hand the sick man wildly called out:

"You one-armed devil! Oh, you merciless devil! You've come to kill us!"

With a strangled cry the girl placed her hands on de Croteau's chest and sought to push him away from the porch. He gently swung her aside and darted into the cabin. She followed and endeavored to draw him back, then realized the hopelessness of it and threw herself face down on a rude couch and wept as if her heart would break.

De Croteau pulled back a curtain that divided the cabin and advanced to the bed where Rodney lay, his eyes glaring with madness. He placed a hand on the hot forehead and felt the fever burning there.

With the touch of the hand on his head the invalid grew quieter. Strange symptoms for one suffering from rheumatism, thought de Croteau as he peered down into the cadaverous face.

There were bandages around the left upper arm and shoulder. These had become disarranged somewhat by the tossing about of the sick man. As de Croteau took hold of the loose end of a bandage the girl suddenly appeared at the opposite side of the bed and stretched forth a hand to stop him, her gaze almost as wild as the invalid's.

"Leave that alone!" she gritted.

With his free hand he caught her two hands and held them from interfering. Then he gently unwound the bandage. The last covering showed dark stains. As it came clear it laid bare two deep wounds in the arm and one in the shoulder, wounds which were inflamed and much swollen.

De Croteau lifted his eyes inquiringly to meet the frightened gaze of the girl. She buried her face in the coverlid, her shoulders shaking spasmodically.

"They must be cleansed," he murmured. "Bring me salt and water. Once they are cleansed his fever should leave him."

She lifted her face, wet with tears, stared across the silent form and found nothing but pity in the young man's visage. Without a word she hastened to do as she was bid. With deft touch de Croteau bathed the wounds and covered them lightly with fresh bandages.

When he had finished and was tiptoeing between the curtains and to the door she followed him and faintly sobbed:

"It was death if we called for help. I did the best I could, but I was ignorant. I used whisky for washing his hurts; then he would not let me touch them. You've learned the truth—and may God help us!"

"God will curse me as I deserve if I do not stand your friend," he whispered. "I will call early in the morning. Do not open the door if any one else should come. But we must talk, you and I, and make some plans."

"It was in self-defense," she pleaded. "It was his life or that man's."

"Of course. I never doubted that," he soothed.

"But I doubted you—when you said you acted in self defense."

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"That doesn't count. Try to sleep when he sleeps. He should be much better."

And it seemed very natural and proper that he should pat the bowed head reassuringly; nor did it surprize him that she should catch his hand between her palms in expressing her gratitude.

CHAPTER VIII

TO FIND A FITTING CRIME

DE CROTEAU was beginning to learn that service is the key to contentment, and the lesson was new to him. Although mired by his folly, although a mother's grief still etched deep lines in his soul, there was the eternal compensation—the consciousness of trying to aid the helpless. His unselfish effort could not fend off all the misery trailing his reflections, but it did allow some surcease from harrowing regrets, and it did grant a partial immunity from remorse. He slept well that night and was awake before sunrise, and on his way to the Rodney cabin.

Francine Rodney was on the porch, waiting for him, for she ran to meet him the moment he came into view. Her tired eyes told him that she had rested but little, and yet there was less of hopelessness in the face she lifted for his inspection. Perhaps the knowledge that another was willing to shoulder her troubles was renewing her spiritual strength. At least her weariness was largely physical and showed none of the preceding day's hysteria.

"How is he?" softly cried de Croteau, seizing her hands.

"Thank God he rested quite well and woke up rational," she told him, her fine eyes glowing with gratitude. "I have bathed the cuts, and I know they are not as inflamed. And I told him about you, told him you know all and can be trusted. He was much pleased. It takes some responsibility off his mind.

"Poor dear! It must seem strange to have some one besides me to count on. He is sleeping now, so we'll talk outside."

She led the way to the end of the cabin, where they would not be seen by any one approaching from the creek, and seated herself on the edge of the porch behind the heavy vines. He sat on the ground at her feet and waited for her to begin.

"MY FATHER has done all that he told about last night," she began. "Hired hand, doctor, storekeeper, and a member of the General Assembly. He was about to try for Congress when Governor Clayton proclaimed martial law.

"Conditions have been terrible in Arkansas. In many counties the people are still ruled by terror.

"The 'Knights of the White Camelia,' better known as the 'Ku Klux Klan,' has intimidated many county and State officials, has driven them from the State or killed them. The plan of the organization is to overturn the State Government by assassinating the officials or by scaring them out of the country. Sheriffs are warned not to make arrests. Judges sometimes have to hide to save their lives. State troops are forbidden to drill.

"The Ku Klux meets only at night, and never in a house. So night travel is dangerous. Each patch of woods may contain a band of K. K. K.

"The negroes are thoroughly terrified and do not dare stir from their cabins after dark. They are warned not to register. If they persist they are whipped or killed. Ban Humphries, a leader among the negroes, was taken from his cabin and killed just before we came away.

"Registrars are assaulted and forced to flee. Jurors and witnesses do not dare do their duty by hearing cases, and in testifying against murderers caught red-handed.

"We were in Lawrence County when father got word they were after us—after both of us. He had spoken and written strongly against the crimes of the organization, also against ruffians flocking in from neighboring States to rob and kill under the guise of the K. K. K.

"To stop him they sent warning they would kill me as well as him. The danger was so great we tried to reach the Mississippi and escape to St. Louis. A friendly sheriff met us and warned us to turn back and try for the Missouri border as the way east was blocked by father's worst enemy.

"This man was Leroy, the one-armed man who came here as a peddler. He was Cyclops of the Batesville Ku Klux Den. It was generally believed that my father had in his possession certain lists of Den

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commanders and a roster of the members. At one time he did have some lists, but nothing as complete as the K. K. K. leaders supposed. As soon as he received the papers he turned them over to Adjutant-General Keyes Danforth, as any honest citizen would have done.

"Leroy had the instinct of a bloodhound. He was almost up with us when we made a night ride and crossed the border. He lost our trail and was slow in picking it up, as is shown by the length of time it took him to reach this neighborhood.

"I grew to believe he would never find us. My father was not optimistic. He knew how deadly, how implacable the man was. That was why he went to the hills to find a more hidden shelter. He knew Leroy would track us down. And Leroy did, although the trail was rather blind and he was not sure we were here until he had talked with the Crakes."

"Those Crakes!" growled de Croteau.

"They can't help being as they are," she sighed. "I pity the woman. She wants to be good to me, but they're in the grip of fear.

"But to come to *the* night, when he found us."

For the first time her voice faltered, and it was only with an effort that she resumed, speaking rapidly as if afraid her strength would give out.

"It was quite dark outside," she resumed. "Father had gone to pick up some wood for the fireplace. I was washing the supper dishes when I thought I heard a horse whinny down the path. I was standing at the window, and father had just come in with an armful of wood, when I saw a figure stealing toward this end of the cabin.

"Perhaps the light was sufficient for me to see this man had only one arm, perhaps it was instinct. I don't know. But I whispered to father that a one-armed man was at the end of the cabin.

"Father snatched up his revolver and slipped out the door and went around the other end of the cabin. I held my hand to my mouth to keep back a scream.

"They met behind the cabin. I heard words, my father asking something, the other answering him in a soft voice. As they talked they backed around the end of the cabin and into the light shining across the porch. Father was warning Leroy to keep back. Leroy was insisting his errand was a peaceable one—and all the time he was trying to get closer.

"Then—then he leaped forward and thrust with his knife. Father staggered back. He acted as if paralyzed. He held the revolver half-raised but did not defend himself.

"Twice more Leroy struck with the knife. I screamed for father to shoot. Then father fired. The two went to the ground and out of sight behind the vines.

"Two more shots were fired. I saw the flashes through the vines. Oh, it was so horrible—so ghastly and horrible.

"Then everything was very quiet. I did not move, nor cry out again. After the last two flashes from the revolver I felt as if frozen.

"I heard a step on the porch—but not until my father staggered through the door did I know which one was coming."

"You poor child!" murmured de Croteau as she paused and fought to control herself. "Don't tell any more now."

"I'll tell it all—this once," she whispered. "My father told me Leroy was dead and that he must hide him. I had hard work to make him wait until I had tied bandages over his stab wounds. He directed me to get a blanket and cord, and then ordered me to stay inside while he wrapped Leroy up. He would not bring the horses nearer the cabin for fear of leaving a trail, but wounded as he was, he carried the man down to them. Then he came back and told me to put out the light and let no one in while he was gone.

"It was a long time that I waited in the darkness before he returned. And he had walked all the way back of course.

"I got him to bed and did what I could. I thought whisky might be good for washing his wounds, and went to you.

"The first day he seemed to be all right. He told me the wounds would soon heal, but he was worried for fear Leroy had met Baker. Baker had told us he was a K. K. K. in hiding, and had boasted of it.

"We knew if the two had met there would be small chance of our getting away from this place. But thank Heaven Baker did not show up. It was a wonderful relief to have Mrs. Crake say he had been away for some days. Yesterday she told me they were hunting for the pedler. What else is there that I don't know?"

"Baker is back."

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THE old horror returned to her face, and she whispered: "Then I was mistaken. The two had met!"

"No. Baker is puzzled over Leroy's disappearance. He is greatly disappointed to have been away. They were acquainted in Arkansas and in much deviltry together. But Baker only knows the man has been to the creek and probably has been killed."

"Why—why that?" she gasped.

"Because they've found the horses and packs. They've tried to find Leroy with Crake's dogs—and failed."

"They'll succeed!" she said. "They know we came from Arkansas. Baker will guess Leroy was after us."

And her face was as gray and drawn as when her father's delirium betrayed their secret.

"Your nerves are unstrung. They won't find him. But say they did, there's nothing to connect your father with it. It's supposed he came here to escape from the law. The minute he's able to sit on a horse you two must get away, either into Arkansas or to Springfield."

"Not south!"

And she shuddered.

"Law and order will win the day down there in time," she added, "but it won't be safe for us for some time. Leroy was the worst; but there are others equal to killing us. And some one stole our two horses the first week we were here."

"I have a horse. I'll get two more somehow," he declared. "You must make for the hills and work north to the Harsville road."

"If they give us time," she murmured.

"Your father will soon be on his feet. Then a night ride and you'll be leaving all this trouble behind."

After a silence she said:

"I can't feel sorry that Leroy is dead, that my father killed him. I suppose that is wrong, but I'm glad of that much even if other trouble dogs us.

"Sorry?"

And he laughed harshly. "It's one of the best strokes of work your father ever did. Tell me if he found a hiding-place in the hills?"

She nodded slowly and explained:

"He figured it's about ten miles above the Knob, a dry cave near a little run. But there's one drawback to it."

As she did not continue he prompted:

"Well? Go on."

"It's the cabin of this man called Bender. The cabin is half-way between the Knob and the cave, and my father knows of no way to get to the run except to pass by the cabin. He saw Bender enter and leave the cabin. It's lonely enough up there, but Bender's place makes it a dangerous neighborhood. There must be other caves off the path to Bender's cabin, but once the weather changes we can't wander around to pick and choose."

"I'll try to make the trip with you. As far as Hartsville anyway. From there you should have no trouble in making Springfield. I'm sorry my trouble won't permit me to go way through with you."

"You're kind to forget your troubles and help us," she said.

The pent-up desire to talk about himself and the tragedy in his life seized upon her words as an invitation. In a broken voice he spoke of his mother, and briefly told of the race and the fight. She listened sympathetically, but when he had finished she asked—

"Wasn't there any young woman to feel bad about it?"

He felt ill at ease, but admitted that her suspicion was correct. Then he awkwardly confessed his attachment to Jessie Lascar and explained her insistence that he should flee.

"She didn't have time to think," Francine said when he ended his disjointed recital. "It all took her by surprize. Doubtless she's now wishing you had stayed to face it."

"I don't believe so," he mumbled. "No; she isn't that kind. It was easier for her to have me off the map. I don't blame her."

"Everything will clear up, and then she'll be happy to have you back."

"She's very proud. She feels the disgrace keenly. She resents it. She is just, but I don't think it would be easy for her to forgive. No; that is something that's ended.

"I shouldn't have bothered you with it, but a fellow sometimes gets in a place where it seems he must talk. It's done me a world of good.

"Even while telling it my wits were working on your case. You must fight for time, and there's only one way to gain the necessary time. Bender and his men

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believe your father has broken the law; they must continue to think so. I expect to see him tonight. I'll do all the talking and tell all the lies. They won't flatter your father, but they'll make Bender respect him. That's the main point."

"It's good of you to be willing to lie for us, but I don't understand what you mean," she said.

"A general belief that you two are fugitives from the law isn't sufficient. Bender already has declared his intention to learn just what your father did. I must tell him before he calls in person to find out."

"You'd charge my father with some crime?" she asked, bewilderment giving ground before fresh alarm.

"With some definite crime," he firmly replied.

"He would never consent. I'll do anything to save him, but he would never be willing. He's very stubborn."

"I must fasten it upon him even if he denies it," persisted de Croteau.

She frowned in worriment and timidly asked—

"Just what would you charge him with?"

"That's the hard point to settle," he said with a shake of his head. "It must be some crime which promises a profit."

"I don't understand you," she querulously protested. "I'm willing to carry out any ruse to get my father clear of this place. But I must know what you propose doing."

"Not a thief," mused de Croteau as if talking to himself. "That wouldn't do."

"A thief!" she whispered. "Oh, never anything like that! A man may kill in anger, but a thief, a cold-blooded thief——"

"I wasn't thinking of your father's feelings or yours," he sharply informed her. "It's no time to quibble. I'm trying to think of a game to fool Bender and Buckshot Baker. You'll have to lay your punctilios aside till you're north of the Ozarks. I'd gladly picture him a thief, only Bender would at once demand whatever I said he had stolen."

"There must be some other way. That's too shameful. He would never play the part," she rebelled.

"No; theft wouldn't answer," he regretfully conceded. "Even if I supplied the money. Don't look like that. I didn't steal it. And even if Bender got it he might turn against you. I must think of something that promises a profit, a continuing profit. That's it! A continuing profit to the gang!"

"Something worse than stealing?" she cried.

"He'll scarcely be overnice if it means saving your life, saving you from something worse than death."

"I can always save myself from that," she told him, her voice steady and her gaze level.

"Forgery!" he exclaimed. "Now perhaps that's what I'm after. A forger could make money for the gang, but he couldn't be expected to work while ill. They must think him crippled with rheumatism after he's able to run for it."

"He'll never do it," she firmly assured.

"Then he's unnatural. If he won't act a lie to save you it doesn't make any difference what becomes of him. But I believe he will. You're to tell him nothing. I'll talk to him later."

"There surely must be some other way. Crime and criminals! Will we ever breathe pure air again!"

"Life is more important than your environment. You've stumbled into this mess and you must get clear. It's a case of whipping the devil with fire."

"If only that man hadn't found us!" she lamented."

"Now, Miss Francine, get this idea firmly fixed in your head: you were in great danger before Leroy came. The only reason why Baker hasn't openly shown his hand was because Bender told him to hold back until your father's supposed offense was known.

"Believing he is an ordinary criminal wouldn't save *you*. He would have to prove he was too valuable a criminal to be antagonized before you could be safe. "That was the condition before Leroy came, with Bender just on the point of demanding full information as to the reason for you being here. That's the condition now, and the demand will be pressed once they get through with puzzling over the pedler.

"You can refuse to give any explanation for hiding here. It'll be better that way. I'll do the lying, so that won't be on your conscience——"

"Please! Please!" she whispered, laying her hand on his arm. "I'm not as bad as that, really."

"I'm a fool!" he bitterly retorted. "I didn't mean that other. You're all right.

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Nevertheless you're to explain nothing. It'll make my story ring truer.

"Your father's to continue too ill to see any one. No matter who calls, whether Bender or Baker, keep the door barred and threaten them with the rifle. Before anything like that happens, however, I will have talked to Bender and will have had a talk with your father.

"Beware of the Crakes. They are simple folks, but they are much afraid of Bender and tell him everything they hear or see. And in their way they are shrewd. They know the difference between rheumatic conditions and gunshot wounds. Don't let the woman inside the door again. Tell her your father is sleeping—anything; but keep her out."

"I appreciate what you're willing to do for us, but I don't like it," she told him as he rose to go. "It does seem as if there must be some other way out."

SHE was too prudish, he told himself. Aloud he observed:

"Don't think, Miss Francine, that I have the criminal's point of view so strongly as to turn to it instinctively as a defense. Almost always the truth is best, but in this case the truth must be suppressed for a bit. Good-by. Good luck. Keep brave."

He held out his hand and retained hers until with a slight flush she gently released it. He feared he had offended one who was helpless to protest; and, his own face highly colored, he turned abruptly and hurried down the path.

Shifting his course before striking into the creek path, he bore back to the east and made a wide détour so as to approach the Gad cabin from the east. When he broke through the bushes, comforted by the realization that no one had seen him making up the creek path, he was halted by something moving in his cabin. He caught the motion through the small back window.

He waited until he heard Bender's whining voice. Without further delay he walked around the cabin and entered. Bender, Baker, Bige Whills and two others, whose names he did not know, were in the cabin waiting for him.

Before he could speak Bender was saying—

"Buckshot was 'lowin' ye'd skipped."

"Skipped from what? Why?" countered de Croteau.

Baker was staring at him curiously. They had not met for several days, and the faint smile on the hawk-like face was disquieting. De Croteau added:

"Baker's got several things to learn. One is that when I light out it won't be on foot."

"Maybe I've learned several things already," said Baker with a chuckle.

He had his sword-cane across his knees, and as he watched de Croteau he played with it ceaselessly. Bender watched the two with keen interest. He sensed their hostility to each other, and he believed that the time might come when he could utilize it to his own advantage. Baker was too reckless, too ambitious, to make a good lieutenant. If de Croteau should show the proper spirit, accompanied by a willingness to take and carry out orders, he would be a much better man.

Swinging about to face the leader, de Croteau said:

"I'll be pleased to learn the meaning of this visit. It's rather early for neighbors to be dropping in."

Bender's head rolled uneasily, as if maintaining its balance with difficulty and his long neck seemed to grow even longer. He shrilly informed the other:

"We've found something."

De Croteau held his nerves under control and braced himself. He lifted his brows inquiringly but did not speak.

"Your friend Bige found it," added Baker.

Whills grinned malevolently.

"I haven't the least idea what you're talking about," said de Croteau. "I suppose it's important or you wouldn't be hastening here to tell me. If Whills has found anything it's probably because he knew where to look for it; otherwise he wouldn't know enough to find it."

With a roar Whills came to his feet. Bender leaned forward and watched the two eagerly. De Croteau fixed his wide eyes on Whills' face and waited for him to make a hostile move. Now that he was on his feet Whills did not seem to know what he should do next. Bender smiled; Baker frowned.

"Set down," commanded Bender after the tableau had lasted for half a minute.

Whills dropped to the floor.

To de Croteau Bender explained:

"Crake's dawgs wa'n't sich fools as we'd 'lowed. They tried to tell us yesterday

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that the one-armed man was in the crick. Whills got him out. He was tied up in a blanket and shot through the heart."

"That certainly is news!" cried de Croteau. "Who killed him?"

"We called to see if ye had any idees on that p'int," the plaintive voice continued.

"I? Not an idea. I know nothing of the circumstances yet."

"Baker knew him in Arkansas. Baker's been bitin' his head off to think he wa'n't on the crick when the feller showed up. Baker opines ye might know how he come to git killed. There ain't any doubt 'bout his quittin' Crake's place to come here."

Baker spoke up, coldly declaring: "De Croteau, as far as we can find out you are the only man who had the chance to do for him. The Crakes swear you asked him to come here, that he started for here, and that, being a stranger to the crick, he wouldn't have left their cabin except to come here in answer to your invitation."

"You knew him well, I take it," mused de Croteau.

"I have known him for years. He was my friend—as far as I let myself have a friend. And the man who killed him will reckon with me."

He leaned forward, his two hands separating on the sword-cane, ready to unsheath the steel.

"We'll see about that if the killing is fastened on to me," said de Croteau. "Bender, you're a man of sense. Baker has lots of common sense, too. But just now he appears to be worked up. I don't think he can judge honestly. Is there any one here who believes I ever saw the man until I saw him at the Crake cabin?"

The men exchanged glances. Bender's lips twitched with a smile. He was deeply enjoying the situation and de Croteau's reaction to the charge. He waited for Baker to speak and as that worthy remained silent, finally said:

"From what the Crakes say the pedler and ye met for the first time at Corn's cabin. Ye don't go ag'in' that piece of evidence, do ye, Buckshot?"

Baker frowned, fearing a trap, but was forced to shake his head. Bender leered at his sullen lieutenant and nodded for de Croteau to proceed. The young man continued:

"Then if I didn't know him why should I kill him? To rob him? I was his best customer. The horses have been found, so I could not want his horses. Was it to get my money back? I didn't have to spend it buying toys for the Crake children and calico for the woman. By the way, has the body been searched?"

Bender slapped his knees and writhed in silent laughter. His new man had brains and was quick to use them. If he would be amenable to discipline he would make an exemplary lieutenant. His eccentric voice was scarcely audible when he said:

"Ye beat a Dutchman, de Croteau! Ye make out a good case for yerself. Buckshot, ye oughter thought of them things afore puttin' it on to this younker.

"Yes, de Croteau, the body's been s'arched and considerable money was found on it. The pedler lost nothing but his life. His hosses was picked up down here, but that ain't far for them to wander as he was kilt and tossed into the crick within two miles of here."

De Croteau thrilled with joy at this expressed belief that the homicide had taken place where the body was thrown into the creek. Bender concluded—

"Who done for him couldn't 'a' wanted his money, his goods or his nags."

"The murderer might have been scared off before robbing the body," gritted Baker.

"And yet have time to tie yer friend up in a blanket?" taunted Bender.

"The blanket may give a clue," persisted Baker.

"It should give a good clue," agreed de Croteau. "Crake will tell you I arrived here without any and bought mine of him."

"The blanket never come from the Crake cabin," said Bender, smiling broadly.

De Croteau also smiled, and Baker exploded: "——! If he didn't do for my friend he knows who did. Something tells me he knows that much. I'll wipe that grin off his face."

With a lightning flash he bared the blade, but before he could straighten out in a ferocious lunge de Croteau had him covered.

"You'll never get me when I'm looking, Baker," he warned.

"And if ye did, Buckshot, ye'd find one of my knives most vastly sunk in yer carcass," howled Bender, infuriated at having his enjoyment disturbed by such a gross display of insubordination. "I'm boss. I'm yer boss as much as I be Corn Crake's boss. Ye hark to that."

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PANTING from his efforts to control his passion, Baker replaced his sword, forced a semblance of a mile to his lips and said:

"I beg the pardon of you all. My nerves ave way.

"De Croteau was wrong in saying I had ommon sense. I've shown none this orning.

"My excuse is Leroy's death. Leroy as his real name. We worked together n Arkansas. He never would have come p here except for two things; to see me, nd to do an important piece of work. He never came to see me as he did not know was here. Whatever his work was it ould have benefited all of us, I am positive.

"Whoever killed him must have first on his good will. No man he was suspiious of could have stood in front of him and illed him through the heart."

"I never saw nor heard of the man until I met him at Crake's," said de Croteau, placing his gun. "And I never saw him at that once. Baker, you're the only an in these bottoms who knew him. You're the only man who admits to have een friendly enough with him to win his onfidence. You're the only man who ould have stood before him——"

"No! Stop that, or I'll do for you!" assionately interrupted Baker, his two ands tearing the sword clear. "Knife Bender, if he says another word of that ort I'll kill him here even if I die the next econd!"

Bender's neck shot forward as he commanded—

"De Croteau, keep shet."

But in the depths of his eyes was something that suggested pleasure on beholding the tables turned on his lieutenant.

"I was away from this creek when Leroy arrived," raged Baker. "I wasn't within miles of here when he was killed. I'd been away for some days. I can prove it by alibis."

"Enough of this fool play," harshly commanded Bender, rising. "Ye went away, Buckshot, and ye 'low ye didn't circle back. So far's I'm consarned the man's dead and the case is ended. Accordin' to our rules it will be brought up at the meetin' tonight for them to chaw over who ain't here this mornin'."

"If they're not interested in it I have something else that will interest them," promised Baker. "It may be interesting to de Croteau, too."

De Croteau caught the threat but said nothing. Baker had arranged some kind of a trap and proposed to spring it that night on the Knob. As the killing of Leroy seemed to be a closed incident de Croteau could think of nothing that concerned him unless it might be the Rodneys; and, unless Baker knew of his last two calls on the girl and something of the nature of their conversation, this alternative seemed scarcely plausible.

One reassuring fact was the growing antagonism between Bender and Baker. In various ways Bender had revealed a jealousy of the man. His quick insistence to assert his authority and put Baker in his place proved his prejudice. Baker's willingness to take the lead betrayed how it irked him to play the subordinate. So de Croteau was convinced that the outlaw leader was his best defense against the Ku Klux fugitive's machinations.

As the men left the cabin Bender drew aside and allowed them to precede him. He stepped outside and loitered before the doorway while they mounted, then announced:

"De Croteau, I want another word with ye. Crake says ye didn't do yer part of the spyin' at Gainesville. All ye fellers ride on. This ain't any of yer business."

Baker did not relish leaving the two alone, but already he was in the saddle. He galloped down the trail followed by the others. Bender waited until the last man had disappeared, then said to De Croteau:

"Tell me the truth and I won't hold it ag'in' ye. Did ye do for that Ku Klux feller?"

"Never. The worst harm I ever did him was to buy his goods."

"Ye expected him to come here?"

"I hoped he would come. I was lonely. He was pleasant-spoken. I sat up beyond my usual bedtime looking for him."

"Didn't hear nothin' suspicious?"

"Nothing."

"Crake told me he 'lowed he heard gunfirin' that night."

"I don't believe it. I was on my doorstep smoking for a long time. I would have heard anything he could have heard."

Bender arched his bushy brows, rubbed his long nose thoughtfully and confessed:

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"I'd put more stock in it if his woman said she heard it. But Corn's such a meechin' cuss, so quick to say the thing he hopes will please ye, that he's onreliable. I 'low he didn't hear nothin'. Baker's got a rod in pickle for ye."

"And one for you, too," de Croteau boldly informed him.

With a quick sidewise slant of his head Bender stared at him, then said:

"Baker's 'bout e't out this range. Not 'nough pea-vine fodder for strangers. We're gettin' sort of crowded along these bottoms. Baker's jest 'bout got his share of the feed. I 'low he's got it in for ye along of that Rodney gal."

De Croteau laughed scornfully.

"Then he's an idiot. I scarcely know her. He will never know her. The first time I saw her she showed she was afraid of him."

Bender smiled as if pleased to hear this and confided:

"I'm goin' over that way mighty soon and have a look at her. Folks may tell ye I'm a lonely cuss. I be. That don't mean I hanker to be alone. When I see the right woman——"

He ceased speaking and stared with the wide gaze of the cat tribe at something in his thoughts. De Croteau, sick at heart as he watched the baleful eyes half-shut, then open to their full extent, held his tongue. With a shrug of his shoulders Bender aroused himself and sharply demanded—

"What's he goin' to do tonight in yer case?"

"I don't have the least idea. I only know there's nothing he can do except to tell some lie. I've concealed nothing since coming here. Every one knows why I'm here and why I must stay."

The last pleased Bender immensely. He showed it by saying:

"Baker never 'lowed to stick here only till it was safe for him to go south. He's jest bangin' round here till he can be safe in lightin' out. I had to take him in or kill him. He'd make a master hand for me if he wa'n't so overreachin'. So I 'low he'll be goin' away soon.

"Keep yer trap shet. Ye've done well so far. I won't say nothin' 'bout how ye skimped my orders at Gainesville, though it ain't healthy to do that as a rule.

"And don't make any play for that Rodney gal—yet. Mebbe she won't suit my notions. I never was a hand for women; still I'm human. Baker's dish is cooked so far as she's consarned."

WITH a great effort de Croteau concealed his disgust and anger and managed to reply:

"I'm not interested. Her father's sick abed with rheumatism—got it up in the hills probably. I called to see if I could be of service. She looks mighty white and peaked. Perhaps she'll look better when she gets some color."

"She looked likely 'nough at a distance," mused Bender. "'Liza Crake says she's master purty."

"Oh, she does well enough, no doubt."

"If she was homely's a stab-and-a-run fence I'd be callin' there soon jest to l'arn her pap's business. I give him lots of rope, knowin' I had him when I wanted him. If he'd come here alone I'd had him at the Knob long 'fore this."

"I believe I can find out his game," declared de Croteau. "I've got a shrewd notion already."

"What d'ye 'low?"

"I may be dead wrong. I'd rather not say until I've had a chance to jump one question at the girl. If she's taken off her guard she'll show if I'm right or wrong."

"Knife Bender ain't in the habit of waitin' when he's cur'ous to l'arn things. Be ready to tell it to the gang tonight. If ye're mistook it won't be held ag'in' ye."

Then fiercely—

"Them's orders!"

"I'll be ready. But did Baker tell you what he intends to spring tonight?"

"I told him same's I've told ye. He hinted out things, and I told him to talk turkey tonight. I told him not to forgit that I'm boss. That's for ye, too, as well as for Buckshot Baker. So long."

De Croteau accompanied him to his horse and watched him ride up the creek path, then turned back to the cabin to await the coming of the night. The ordeal of the Knob filled his thoughts and soon resolved into two worries.

Baker had some trick to play on him in the presence of the gang. Baker was as cunning as he was unscrupulous. Whatever he undertook would not be lacking in the merit of evil. It was his boasted custom to strike from behind, but now he would

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be subtle enough to attack his victim without incurring the opposition of Bender.

The time had passed when he could have killed and remained unquestioned, for de Croteau had been accepted, tentatively at least, as a member of the gang. Rich in resources, Baker had shifted his plans; but the result would be none the less deadly. By sheer cleverness in plotting he would endeavor to make Bender the executioner. De Croteau feared him as one possessing the friendship and help of a personal devil.

The other worry was the problem of extricating the Rodneys from their peril. Both were in great danger because of Leroy's death. Francine might have to choose between death and something infinitely worse because she was a woman.

Less than a hundred miles away was an entirely different world, where women were safe because of honorable men. The thought seemed fantastic; a good horse and three days' ride and a woman could choose and reject, the supreme prerogative which civilization had conferred on the sex. Three days of grace and a scant hundred miles!

As he mulled over the natural obstacle the distance stretched out until it reached the moon, the Ozarks towered to invisible heights, and the three days became an eternity.

"It's got to be done!" he gritted. "It's just got to be done. I can't flash in the pan on the first disinterested thing I ever tried to do."

Then he wondered if he were disinterested. The silent query disturbed him. Of course he would do it for any woman in trouble, he stoutly averred. While this was true—for a de Croteau was ever reckless of results when it came to aiding the helpless—yet there remained the little query.

Jessie Lascar had shut him out of her life. This girl brought fragrant memories of the little mother. He confessed to himself he was interested in Francine, but hastened to add that there was no token of her reciprocating.

Returning to the all-important problem of getting her out of the country, he at once decided that his task was most dangerous and difficult. The girl's inability to act a lie would offset all his ingenuity, he feared. He suddenly found that his major obstacle was not the hills and a hundred miles but the girl's pellucid honesty of thought. To ask her to dissemble was to ask the sunlight to make believe it was the shadow.

"The best I can hope for from her is that she keeps her mouth shut," he groaned; and yet his soul did homage to her purity.

His little mother often had told him that Truth needs never disguise itself or equivocate. He accepted this as being true in the case of little mothers, who never find themselves in dubious situations.

"It's all right for angels like you, *maman*, to talk that," he glumly told the dead fireplace, "but *mon père* would do some tall lying if he were in my boots and as helpless as I am."

Then in apostrophe to Francine he added:

"Your woman's notions are beautiful. It's such notions, I reckon, that make you so wonderful, so different. But needs must when the devil drives. If I paint your father black you'll deny it. All right. That'll work well on Bender. I'll do extra lying. The more you protest the more he shall believe."

Arriving at this conclusion, he took up the phase of lawlessness he should fasten on Rodney. Repeatedly he assailed the problem only to be rebuffed.

He had felt inspired when he suggested to Francine that her father should pose as a forger. Now the idea did not make a strong appeal. He could present to the gang nothing but his bare word. He could not have knowledge of the fact unless Rodney had told him. If Rodney had told him then he would tell the others.

Again, he had failed to take into account the intellectual background of his scheme. The average intelligence of the gang was not high. They were not men who could vision gold and silver resulting from the knavery of a cunning pen. Show them money or goods, and their response would be immediate. Did they possess Baker's mental capacity the crime of forgery would intrigue them mightily.

He set about correcting this error. He endeavored to place himself on their plane and picture some bit of outlawry that would capture their fancy. All he could see were midnight raids, the looting of stores, the robbery of stage-coaches; direct, obvious crimes, entirely lacking intermediary cunning.

"There's always a way," he fiercely insisted, rising and going out into the sunshine.

He walked with bowed head back and

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forth before the cabin. Three men rode up the creek path toward the Knob and eyed him curiously. Later Bige Whills and another man came down the path, and Whills made some remark on sighting de Croteau which caused his companion to laugh loudly.

MIDDAY came and he had no desire for food. In the middle of the afternoon the voice of Crake aroused him from his deep meditation. Crake was accompanied by his wife, children and dogs, and was reluctant to cross the creek.

De Croteau heard him tell of taking his family up the west bank to a point opposite to where the pedler's body had been found. Now they were on their way home with Eliza frankly explaining that it was always best to keep running water between one and the habitat of a ha'nt.

"Sich doin's!" she excitedly appended. "We'll all be murdered in our sleep next an' wake up dead. They took the hosses an' packs to the Knob. They buried *him* right on the bank where his ha'nt will trouble folks usin' the path. I've told the children never to go up on your side. You come along with us an' have a snack to eat."

De Croteau thanked her and refused. Crake was anxious to get home. He nervously told de Croteau:

"When I hoot tonight you come across. It's rougher footing on this side, but it's more soothing."

"When I have business up the crick I'll travel on this side," retorted de Croteau.

"Then I'm coming mighty early," sighed Crake. "It's all dad-fetched foolishness to go gunning for trouble. I won't make back-tracks for anything on two or four legs, I won't give a lie or take one; but when it comes to ha'nts they can have all the trail, and thank you, ma'am. What with old Gad's ha'nt, and this new one your side, the crick's gitting too populous."

They left him, and he resumed his walking before the cabin. He wondered how the girl was getting along with the sick man. There was always the danger of Rodney's fever returning, sending him into delirium and betraying the gruesome secret to any chance caller, like Eliza. Only the slimmest of chances had prevented Baker and Leroy from meeting.

"Luck was with them, and Leroy can't talk now," de Croteau muttered.

Maturer thought on this point brought its troop of fears. The population along the creek was insignificant. Baker knew that his old Ku Klux mate was cunning and persistent. Already he had taken it for granted that Leroy's errand was a definite one.

Putting himself in Baker's place, de Croteau decided that he would use elimination in finding Leroy's prospective victim. He would check off the Crakes and other permanent settlers, with his suspicions centering on any strangers—Jefferson de Croteau and Rodney.

Had no money been found on the dead man, and had his packs and horses been disposed of, there would remain the suspicion that some of the settlers had succumbed to greed and had killed for gain. But now it was shown that robbery had not been the motive Baker would be thrown back on the only remaining hypothesis of Leroy acting for revenge.

"In satisfying them I didn't do it I did a bad job for the Rodneys," he concluded. "Baker'll guess the truth the first card out the box. Probably has guessed it before this. Rodney's crime must be made mighty fascinating to Bender to save him from Baker. Now for the crime." And he struck his fist against his head to quicken his wits.

"A criminal, and a crime that promises a profit—a big profit. He stole county funds? They'd make him hand over. If he had any money to hand over, if he'd use mine, they'd kill him after getting it. No, no. It must be a crime that promises a continuing profit.

"Stole money and hid it some distance from here? No good. They'd wring a description of the hiding-place from him. They'd keep him alive till those sent to investigate reported back it was a lie.

"A profit and a continuing profit? Something which will make the gang keen to keep him alive even if it's known he killed Leroy. Now I wonder!"

He seated himself on the doorstep, clutched both hands in his hair and concentrated.

For an hour he remained so motionless that squirrels ventured close to his feet. Now he was trying to put himself in Rodney's place, to assume that the man was a criminal at heart. He endeavored to put

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on Rodney's personality, and to imagine some crime such a man might commit.

Anything which smacked of violence was out of the question. He was not of that type. The catalog of business cunning shading off into illegal acts only suggested embezzlement and forgery. Neither fitted the case. But what other species of crime could a man of Rodney's mental caliber indulge in did he go wrong? It must be something the man would believe to be safe. Love for his daughter would hold him back from any discoverable offense. A subtle assault on property which would bring rich profits and yet incur the minimum of risk.

Suddenly de Croteau sent the squirrels scampering and scolding as he threw up his head and clapped his hands together and exclaimed:

"The one thing! That, or nothing! And let them deny it and pose to be as virtuous as they surely are, yet I must make the gang believe it. It's a fighting chance and he must take it."

Hugely relieved at having made his decision, he set about preparing for his visit to the Knob, and then cooked and ate the first food he had tasted for the day. His own danger receded into the background as he weighed all the favorable phases of his scheme. It was sure to gain a few days' grace even if ultimately discovered to be a trick. And during that brief period Rodney must improve enough to sit in a saddle. Baker's threat lost its edge. It was as if in finding a way to help his unfortunate neighbors he had strengthened his own position. He was conscious of an uplift in spirit, of a confidence he had not felt before since coming to Wolf Creek.

He did not forget that Baker was his stumbling-block. Bender could be deceived, and his men were as credulous as children in matters outside their daily lives. But Baker was as dangerous as he was educated, and wise in the finer details of crime. But if the gang believed strongly enough, then Baker's skepticism would avail nothing except to make him all the more disliked.

The anxious voice of Crake calling his name brought the world about him again.

"Ain't you ready?" cried Crake, hungrily measuring the time it would take the sun to sink through the western horizon.

"Come across. I'm ready," replied de Croteau.

And, buckling on his belt, he whistled for his horse.

"We've got to go right by the place where he's buried," whispered Crake after reluctantly fording the creek and making the path.

"If that's all we have to go through with it'll be a pleasant evening," muttered de Croteau.

CHAPTER IX

BAKER SPRINGS HIS TRAP

CRAKE'S antipathy to the creek path after nightfall resulted in an early arrival at the Knob. When he and de Croteau reached the collection of huts, only two horses were hitched outside the long cabin. The windows of this structure were illuminated with a rosy glow, and Crake's spirits revived for the moment as he informed his companion that there would be food and drink on the long table before the fireplace.

"That's a master good p'int 'bout Bender," he whispered. "He's a good previder. Always a jug and a hunk of meat ready for the boys."

Yet after de Croteau had turned his horse loose and walked toward the cabin Crake held back as if reluctant to enter.

De Croteau stepped through the doorway, and after a sharp glance at the two men lounging before the fireplace advanced briskly up the room. Bige Whills and the white-haired man eyed him curiously. Crake stole along the wall in a furtive fashion as if desiring to remain unnoticed.

"My name's Hask," the white-haired man informed de Croteau.

He grinned broadly and seemed to harbor no resentment because of their first meeting. Whills contented himself with a grunt and lowered savagely.

"Howy-do, Hask," returned de Croteau; and he flung himself on a settle and stared along the log walls, where hung various firearms.

These ranged from pistols and sawed-off shotguns to the latest models in repeating rifles. He was correct in assuming that the cabin was the gang's arsenal as well as central meeting-place. Five miles north of the Knob was Bender's cabin, if Rodney's description was to be relied upon. Several

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jugs along the wall promised sufficient liquid refreshments, while on the table was a cooked ham and two roasted turkeys, and a quantity of pone bread. What held a peculiar interest for him were the pedler's packs and saddle stacked in a corner.

"How's yer courage?" inquired Hask to make conversation.

"Never better. I see you have the pedler's property here."

"Yep. Hope the boss divides it up tonight. I'm honing to see what's in them bundles." It spoke well for Bender's authority that the packs had not been opened.

"Where are the two horses?" inquired de Croteau.

"Up at the boss' cabin. He'll prob'ly keep the best one for himself."

"Just where is his cabin from here?"

"Foller the path down the north side of the Knob and it'll take ye there. Old Injun trail what leads back into the hills: 'Bout four miles to the boss' place."

"Hush, ye fool!" growled Whills.

"Lawdy! Be I too young to know what I should say?" replied Hask, his white beard bristling. "As for fools, I had a man's sense long afore ye'd quit drinkin' milk. Any orders from the boss for us not to speak of his havin' a cabin up north of here?"

"It's poor business to talk over any of the boss' business," grumbled Whills. "Less ye say the less ye'll have to swaller."

"Oh, I ain't skeered. I've been with the boss too long for him heave a knife at me," said Hask; but there was uneasiness in his bearing and his old eyes were thoughtful as he turned about to study the fire.

"Didn't know there was so much secrecy about it," yawned de Croteau. "No one ever thought he roosts in a tree."

"What ye don't know won't never choke ye," Whills sullenly informed him.

"Well, well, as I live! The man with the notches on his gun!" cried de Croteau in mock amazement. "And I never knew you were here till this minute. How many men have you slaughtered since I saw you last?"

Hask was guilty of a senile giggle. But Whills had learned his lesson and beyond muttering an oath made no reply. De Croteau grinned at his heavy face sardonicaly, and jeered—

"Thinking to stand next to the chief when Baker gets in to be chief, eh?"

BOTH men came up to a sitting posture with the promptness of jumping-jacks answering the string. Fear and anger were in their eyes, but fear predominated.

"For ——'s sake, quit that sort of talk!" whispered Whills. "It ain't true, neither. I don't run with no man ag'in' the boss."

Then hastily as an afterthought:

"Nor does Mr. Baker. Ye'll git your throat sliced first thing ye know. An' I won't do it, neither."

"No, you'll never do it," assured de Croteau. "That is, unless you catch me asleep."

Whills bit his lips but made no reply. Hask's voice trembled as he pleaded:

"Ye don't know. Ye're young. It's all new to ye. I'm old an' been through the game. Keep yer meat-trap shet if ye don't want to peg out in a hurry."

To divert the talk, or else for the sake of venting his spleen, Whills roared at Crake:

"Hi, ye big lout! Come forward and dish out some ruin."

"Tell him where to go to," de Croteau advised Crake.

But the latter made haste to obey, serving the fiery liquor in a dipper and drinking his own dram only after the other two had satisfied their thirst. Whills observed how de Croteau shook his head when the jug was proffered, and laughed knowingly.

"Too rugged for ye, son?" asked Hask.

"I killed a man the last time I drank. I don't want to break out again. And the fellow had his gun out before I started to draw. I've heard Whills always does that —let's a man get the start of him before he begins to draw."

Hask nodded his head in approval and glanced curiously at his friend. The idea was now seeping into Whills' slow wits that the young man was trying to pick a quarrel with him. He did not relish the notion. He pretended not to notice the sarcasm, and was spared from more of it by the stamping of hoofs at the door.

Bender came in, his head rocking from side to side. Baker, carrying a shotgun, walked at his heels.

Behind them came eight men, wild-looking fellows with heavy beards and an abundance of weapons in their belts. Crake took up a position outside the circle, his eyes alert to catch a command. All stared at de Croteau.

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Bender nodded and took his seat at the head of the table and carved a thick slice of ham for himself and a slice of turkey. When he had finished, the others helped themselves and washed down their portions with whisky, Crake silently tipping the jug. Bender remained silent while they were eating.

Baker refused food and sat at one side, the shotgun across his knees, staring malignantly at de Croteau. He did not speak, and de Croteau's face was blank when he happened to meet the fierce gaze.

Bender glanced from one to the other and smiled grimly. The situation pleased him. De Croteau had not been fully tried, but he gave good promise of being able to care for himself. Baker, if the most insignificant in stature, was the most deadly of all the wicked band, the leader excepted as to the last point. Nor were the men ignorant of the hostility between the two; and a whispered word, a sly dig of the elbow, underlined their apparent absorption in the table.

After the last man had satisfied his hunger Bender pulled a knife from his belt and rapped the handle on the table. The men promptly ranged themselves on both sides of the board, pulling settles forward to serve as seats. Baker made no move to join the group, and with a flaming glance Bender ordered:

"Up here with the rest of us, Baker. We're waiting."

Baker seemed to hesitate for a moment, then rose and came forward with ill grace. De Croteau stepped forward to take a seat; but Bender waved him back, directing—

"Take a stool to one side for a bit."

With burning face he obeyed. He was in the band but not of it. Baker leered at him tauntingly, then complained—

"He's wearing guns, chief."

"Time 'nough for him to strip 'em off after I've told him to, " was the gruff reply. "As boss of this outfit I know what I want. Don't any one git afraid that my orders will be overlooked."

"I was only thinking of the rules," murmured Baker.

Bender leaned far forward, his hand closing over the knife, and whined: "I make and unmake rules, Baker. Let's not hear any more of that."

Somehow de Croteau interpreted this passage as being of good omen. The atmosphere was tense. It would require only a word to bring the explosion. If the rupture came he was determined to shoot Baker, should the latter get the best of Bender. Perhaps the leader had some such thought in mind when he refused to enforce his rule against a new man sitting armed in his presence.

Bender leaned back, one hand toying with the long knife, and said:

"Ye boys all know 'bout the dead pedler. He was a friend of Baker's. Baker's keen cut up 'bout his death. Baker's been 'lowin' that the only one who had a chance to do for his friend was our new man here, de Croteau. I've heard his story and it sounded likely. He can tell ye all what he told some of us in his cabin this mornin'."

De Croteau was confused to find all eyes fixed upon. He stood up, a victim of embarrassment until his roving gaze rested on the malignent face of Baker; then his faculty for speech was aroused, and he talked rapidly and concisely.

He described his own brief acquaintance with the dead man and pointed out the utter improbability of his having committed the crime. He repeated the arguments he had made in his cabin that morning; and, turning to the packs, he demanded:

"What did I kill him for? For his goods, his horses? I never took them. For his money? Much of it was money I paid him that day at Crake's, and I am told it was found on him. Did I kill him because I feared or hated him? I never had seen nor heard of him before that day at Crake's. So I could not have hated him. He had but one arm. Do any of you believe I am afraid of a one-armed man?

"Baker says I was the only one who had a chance to kill him. How does he know that when he was absent from the creek? He can't know how many had a chance.

"He says the dead man was a hard man to kill unless some one gained his friendship, and then took him off his guard. I know nothing about that. He was not shot down from behind. He was facing his slayer. He was not caught napping.

"The last time I saw him was at the Crake cabin, after I had bought much of his goods to give away. I expected him at my cabin that night and was sorry he did not come."

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HE SAT down, and Bender nodded his head in approval. Baker's quiet smile persisted. He knew de Croteau would talk in his convincing fashion, and yet his thoughts were pleasing. Bender stared at him thoughtfully for a few moments, then said—

"Baker, ye have the floor."

Baker rose and quietly admitted:

"I was wrong in suspecting de Croteau, although my suspicion was logical at first. I withdraw the charge. I know he could not have done it."

"That's said most han'some!" cried Bender, completely surprized by the frank retraction.

Baker continued:

"If de Croteau had come from Arkansas instead of from Springfield I should have persisted in my suspicion. I'm honest. I say what I believe.

"Leroy was a Ku Klux comrade. It was his duty to punish traitors. He came here to punish some one who had fled from Arkansas. If I had only met him when he first arrived I would know all. Still, I believe I shall soon know whom he was after."

He was smiling complacently as he resumed his seat. De Croteau was shaken with alarm for the safety of the Rodneys. He believed Baker had them in mind, that his shrewd mind had considered every inhabitant of the bottoms. The Rodneys were known to have come from Arkansas. To set a back fire before any names could be called he jumped to his feet and cried:

"How do we know Leroy wasn't after Baker? How do we know Baker didn't break some rules of the Ku Klux and come here to escape their vengeance?"

His audience started at the unexpectedness of the accusation. Baker was quick to sense his peril.

"That's a —— lie!" he yelled, struggling to his feet and lifting the shotgun.

"Down!" screamed Bender, snatching the knife from the table and making ready to hurl it.

For a moment Baker wavered between rage and discretion. He lowered the gun and slumped back into his chair. Bender warned de Croteau:

"Ye're not here to make any charges. All such have to be made to me and given to the men by me. Ye're new to our ways and didn't understand. Now ye know; be careful. We'll vote. Every man who 'lows de Croteau done for the pedler, lift a paw."

No one so voted, although Whills glanced inquiringly at Baker. Bender continued—

"All who 'low he didn't."

Every hand went up, including Baker's.

"Then that's settled, and we're glad to have it over with. This one-armed cuss oughter sent word to me if he was gunnin' for any one up here. The Ku Klux ain't runnin' Wolf Crick. It may want to kill some one we're in favor of killin'. And it might be after some one we want to live. If he was gunnin' for Baker, then Baker had a right to kill him."

"I never killed him," broke in Baker.

"Didn't say ye did. Leroy made a mistake and paid for it. We'll share his stuff later on. The next thing to bring before the band is the man Rodney, who's jest back from the hills. De Croteau says he's sick. He can tell us about him."

With Baker eagerly trying to read his face de Croteau announced:

"He's in bed, suffering from rheumatic fever. I called there this afternoon after you men left me."

"How long afore he can come up here?"

"I don't know, but don't suppose it'll be very long."

"I'll call there tomorrow, chief, and find out just how sick he is," spoke up Baker, showing his white teeth in an ugly smile.

"If he does he'll spoil a pretty game," de Croteau warned the leader; for he knew the time had come to play his best card. "I wasn't very welcome. Baker isn't wanted at all. The girl is afraid of him. She wasn't very willing for me to enter the cabin. But I got in and talked a bit with Rodney. I found out why he is hiding up here."

Baker was nonplused and scowled savagely. Bender was much interested. De Croteau resumed:

"Rodney told me things which his daughter does not know. Things he does not want her to know. He wants me to call again. The girl doesn't. If another goes there Rodney may become scared. By using a little patience we can score heavily."

"Words, words," harshly broke in Baker. "I wish I only knew what your game is."

"I'm boss here," Bender reminded him with a warning glance at his lieutenant. "Keep shet! Go ahead, de Croteau, and quit talkin' in circles."

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"Rodney's wanted in Arkansas for counterfeiting," announced de Croteau. "He's short of money and I promised to help him. He's keen to keep it from his daughter."

Baker's surprize was complete. For once he lost his facial control, and his mouth gaped foolishly. Bender's eyes flamed greedily, but he cautioned:

"It takes more'n his say-so to ye to prove that. How big a reward is offered for him?"

"He said a thousand dollars. It may be he lied——"

"We'll work to have the offer made bigger, no matter what it is," interrupted Bender.

"That was my first thought," de Croteau informed him. "But when he came to asking my help to get him some hard money I reckoned he was worth more to us at liberty, let the reward be many thousand dollars. I came to that decision after he dug some of his counterfeit money from under his bed and gave it to me to pass."

And he took a bank-note from his pocket, and, stepping to the fireplace, lighted it and dropped it flaming in front of Bender.

"What the ——!" wailed Bender, grabbing at the blazing paper only to crush the embers in his hand. "Ye young ——-houn'! What d'ye mean actin' thataway with money? Be ye plumb crazy?"

De Croteau laughed and explained:

"It's a counterfeit. Here are some more. I promised him a fourth in hard money once they were passed."

"And he deposited a neat package of new bills on the table for Bender's inspection.

Astonishment and avarice inflamed the leader's savage visage as he seized the money and hastily thumbed it over. When he had finished he stared blankly from the bills to de Croteau's smiling face, and in a choked voice whispered—

"Ye mean to say these be his work?"

"His last and best. There's none who can turn out better," answered de Croteau. "If he hadn't wanted to keep it from his daughter he never would have brought her here. He made her believe his trouble resulted from politics."

"I never see the like of it!" gasped Bender, mopping the sweat from his angular face.

"He'll take your words as a big compliment. He is proud of his skill, but he knows his daughter will raise the —— if she learns the truth. I'll defy any one this side of Washington to tell those from good bills."

THE effect of the money on the outlaws was tremendous. They were willing to rob and kill for money, but to have the magic power of creating it from blank paper marked for them the zenith of all desirable things.

The wolfish eyes on both sides of the table were focused on the crisp notes. The like had never been seen before on Wolf Creek. De Croteau added—

"Not even the counterfeit bank of Niangua in Pulaski ever put out so good a piece of paper."

Bender leaned back and pumped for breath as his emotions almost overcame him. Retaining the notes in his hands, his high falsetto demanded—

"And he can make more as good as these?"

"Easily. Once he gets over his rheumatism and we can bring a press in for him to use."

Bender opened and closed his mouth without speaking. His vision was beholding a blissful future. A new world was open to him. He had known that the day was fast approaching when the lawless life along the creek must cease. He had accepted that fact philosophically, intent on plying his trade while he could. Then he must run for it and seek a new field in the Southwest.

But here in his right hand was gripped a panacea for all future troubles. These bits of paper eliminated a forced flight to Texas. They insured his life against the violent finale which he had long known must be his destiny.

To remain effectually concealed in the Ozarks was a simple matter, and now he possessed the incentive to do so. Unsuspected, he could build up an amazing fortune and die in his bed.

"Where can he git a press? Meanin', where can we git one for him?" asked Bender in a faint voice.

"He has one hidden outside of Little Rock, if it hasn't been found. And he says he can get one in St. Louis, but it'll cost money."

"We'll do the gittin'," muttered Bender. "We have ways of raisin' the money."

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From the foot of the table came the harsh voice of Baker, asking—

"May I look at those notes?"

Bender shrugged his shoulders as if awaking from a dream and passed the package to the man on his right. The fellow gloated over it with dilated eyes and reluctantly passed it on to his neighbor. In this slow fashion it reached Baker, who seized it eagerly and held a bill up to the light of a wall candle and stared at it long and intently. Then with a staccato yelp he cried:

"—— This is genuine money!"

A roar of exultant laughter swept up and down the table. Even the wise man from the cities was taken in by it. With passionate venom Baker cried:

"You're being made fools of! This isn't counterfeit money. It's real money."

The laughter ceased. The men hitched about uneasily and glanced in bewilderment at their leader. With an ugly grin Bender asked:

"Does a man hand out one thousand real dollars jest as samples? Will a man throw away a thousand dollars to make folks believe he's a counterfeiter?"

"Aye, if he has an object!" thundered Baker, banging his fist on the table. "A man will do it if he believes it will help him steal a woman for himself."

"She's his own gal," jeered Bender. "He don't have to steal her."

"Pay a thousand dollars of good money for *any* woman?" gasped the white-haired Hask.

Baker waited until the clamor died down; then with his voice under better control he said:

"De Croteau is the man with the object. I speak of him and not the girl's father. I say this man is making a fool of you. What's a thousand dollars to a thief who has stolen twenty-five thousand dollars?" And he shook the notes at de Croteau, who instantly reacted to the unexpected accusation by leaping forward and clutching Baker by the throat.

With a scream as unnerving as the yell of a mountain lion Bender hurled his knife, and the blade hissed close to de Croteau's head. In the next moment Whills and Hask had seized and dragged the two men apart.

De Croteau, incapable of speech, panted and glared murder. Baker caressed his throat and in a wheezy whisper persisted:

"I can prove it. I've been to Springfield."

De Croteau's rage lessened as he realized that he would need all his wits in combating this new move of his enemy. Bender rose and motioned for Crake to retrieve the long knife. On receiving the weapon he hissed:

"Too many secrets from me. Baker, ye go runnin' too free. Ye fo'git ye're one of my men, no better'n the rest. Ye've been to Springfield when I s'posed it was some woman scrape. And ye fetch back this wild talk 'bout de Croteau. We're waitin'."

Baker produced a folded paper from an inside pocket, smoothed it out and held it up so all might read, saying—

"I fetched this back from Springfield."

De Croteau with the others stared at it; and none there was as amazed as de Croteau to read:

FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD

For the Capture of Jefferson de Croteau, Wanted for Embezzling Twenty-Five Thousand Dollars.

(*Signed*) **BUSHROD WILLIAMS**
Sheriff of Greene County.

"What d'ye say to that, young feller?" whined Bender.

"Say?" exploded de Croteau. "I say it's a devilish lie. I tell you I killed a man, that I never stole a penny in my life. This man Baker has it in for me. He's been away, he says to Springfield. Any one could have a printing-shop strike off that lying placard, or any other, providing he would pay for the dirty job. Why, if that notice was genuine do you suppose it wouldn't contain some mention of my killing Doc Roman?

"For once this man Baker is clumsy. He should have paid the printer to put in about the killing. Why, I quit Springfield in such a hurry that I didn't have time to fetch along a blanket or a change of clothes. I ran for it just as I was dressed at the race-course.

"Do you suppose a man who steals twenty-five thousand dollars wouldn't have brains enough to know he must be found out? Wouldn't he plan ahead at least to bring some clothes with him? And after getting the money would he duck down here to this stretch of country with it? Do you think me a fool?

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"A thief with twenty-five thousand dollars in his possession would drop out of sight quietly before the theft was suspected. He would make St. Louis and then drop down the river to New Orleans, or strike east and lose himself in some big city.

"I tell you, men, this notice is a lie. I never stole a penny in my life."

DOUBT and bewilderment were reflected in each face with the exception of Baker's. Even Whills was impressed by the sincerity of de Croteau.

Bender searched the flushed face keenly and felt impelled to believe in him. Baker began to fear defeat where he had confidently expected a quick victory; and almost insane with rage he howled—

"It's true, —— you!"

"Lies! All lies!" hoarsely shouted de Croteau. "Give us room and weapons and I'll make him confess he is a liar."

Baker became inarticulate. He tried to fight his way through the men to get at de Croteau, and the latter was eager to meet him. Bender's thin voice warned—

"I'll kill the first man who makes a move at t'other."

"Then send a man to Gainesville, to Ozark; better still, to Springfield," challenged de Croteau. "If I stole the money these notices will be posted all along the great road and in every settlement."

This frank proposal went far thoroughly to convince the gang that he was speaking the truth. Old Hask scored a point in the young man's defense by asking how long a man could stick on Wolf Creek with twenty-five thousand dollars of stolen money without a posse invading the place. Baker countered by declaring that de Croteau's immunity was due to the authorities remaining in ignorance of his whereabouts. Bender, coldly ferocious and with the lust of the killer filling his heart, retorted:

"Baker, ye've said too much 'less'n ye can make good. He was chased here by a sheriff; so it's known he come here. Upcountry sheriffs steer clear of us as a rule, but when twenty-five thousand dollars is the stake there's going to be some stir made besides posting a notice of reward. But ye've heard his words. They sound honest to me.

"However, to settle all doubt we'll put him to the test. First, ye'll keep close to us, Buckshot Baker, and no more ramblin' round. I'm yer boss. Ye keep close here till my men git back with proof as to which of ye is the liar. And the guilty one's goin' to die sudden. It's come to a showdown atween ye two. The gang ain't big 'nough for both on ye."

"That suits me! Start your men for the settlements," cried de Croteau.

"Satisfied," muttered Baker, now becoming quiet and studying de Croteau as if deeply puzzled.

"Then give back that money," commanded the chief.

The disputed package was passed up the table. Bender fondled it lovingly and whined:

"I hope Baker's in the wrong. I could even overlook his mistake if I could know this minute he's in the wrong. This stuff, if it's counterfeit, means a fortune for every man here."

The men turned to Baker appealingly, hoping he would confess. He set his jaws and bared his teeth in a wolfish grin. Bender concluded:

"If it's real money it don't figger up much apiece. And I'll never forgive the feller that raises my hopes and then sends them a-flukin' to ——."

"It'll be accepted as real money anywhere in Missouri with the possible exception of the St. Louis banks," de Croteau calmly assured him. "To satisfy you beyond all question and to make Baker eat his words we'll soon have a batch turned out right under our noses."

The men grinned as they pictured this pleasant experience, and their bearded faces became good-natured in expression as they gazed on the young man.

"I hope it'll turn out as ye say," muttered Bender. "Crake, ye be to home tomorrer mornin' waitin' for orders. Baker, ye keep close to Bige Whills and Old Hask. Last two will answer to me if ye git out of their sight."

"Curse it, Bender! You mean I'm a prisoner?" snarled Baker.

"Meanin' ye're a very dead man and will be planted alongside yer one-armed friend if ye act like a cock turkey to me ag'in," was the low reply. "Boys, if ye see Baker alone my orders is that ye shoot on sight. De Croteau, ye keep close to yer cabin. Scannon, ye'll go back with him to-night and stay with him. I'll drop round and have a talk with ye durin' tomorrer."

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"That suits me fine!" heartily declared de Croteau. "Fill my place up with guards. More the merrier. But there's one thing I'll ask. I want to call at the Rodney cabin tomorrow morning and have a word with Rodney about his press. The sooner we get that in here the sooner we can turn off the stuff. Scannon can go with me, of course."

"It's some game!" protested Baker.

Bender cast him a venomous glance and weighed the request. His men were strongly in favor of anything which would further the production of the bogus money. He himself would be pleased to hear new developments when he made his call at the Gad cabin. Scannon was a hard man for any one to get away from.

"I don't see no harm in that," Bender finally said, his head rolling forward as if about to slip loose from the long neck. "Scannon will kill ye if ye make a move to light out. And if Rodney's got a press in Arkansas my boys can fetch it up here even if Baker didn't dast stay in that State."

CHAPTER X

CRAKE RETURNS

SCANNON was a silent man, yet lacked many of the disagreeable traits which characterized Whills and others of the gang. If he talked but little he was good-natured and had no prejudice against de Croteau. He soon showed that he considered that his duties as guard called only for nominal vigilance, and he evidenced no disposition to annoy his charge.

De Croteau was glad that Whills and Hask were not his keepers. It was plain that Scannon's thoughts were centered on the counterfeiting scheme, for he grunted in huge content as he and de Croteau sat before the fireplace and the latter painted rosy pictures of the future.

Despite his predicament de Croteau found the man's company refreshing. For one thing Scannon displayed a vehemence in insisting that there was no need to practise stealth in the manufacture of bogus money. His terse observations revealed his firm belief that any one had a legal right to make money so long as he turned out currency which could not be distinguished from Government paper. He swore in ejaculations at de Croteau's explanation of the law. His simple mind could understand how it was a crime for individuals to make a slovenly looking bill; but how the law could be offended by a superior article was beyond his comprehension.

Nor would he admit that any damage to property could be worked by an inflated currency. Money was money. The more bank-notes in circulation the more money people would spend, and the country's prosperity depended upon expenditures. He readily conceded that a certain standard of excellence in the finished product was not only desirable but even imperative; but once that standard was reached, he insisted, it was immaterial who made the money, whether a man in the Ozarks or a man in Philadelphia.

Because of this quaint process of reasoning he could not understand Rodney's flight from Arkansas unless it be to escape forced employment under the Government. Anyway every member of the gang was to be rich without risking bullet or noose, or being driven to the far West. They smoked several pipes before Scannon could compose himself to sleep.

The cabin door was closed this night as the air was sharp and frosty, but there was nothing to prevent de Croteau leaving the cabin, for Scannon slumbered most soundly. De Croteau rose early, eager to go to the Rodney cabin and have an interview with Francine and her father before Bender should make his promised call. There was always the chance that the outlaw leader might change his mind and forbid the visit. Scannon was loath to turn out, however, and in response to de Croteau's impatient urging he naively replied:

"When folks git it through their noodles that we can make a better job at printin' paper money then th' Government can I 'low every one 'll want our money 'stead of Government money. Then these old hills will be hummin' with us fellers hustlin' to make 'nough to go round."

Which was an unusually long speech for him.

"The quicker I can see Rodney, the quicker we can get to work," bruskly replied de Croteau. "And the sooner you eat your breakfast the sooner we can be on our way."

Haste on de Croteau's part instantly became of prime importance in Scannon's estimation. He rolled from his blankets

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and blinked silently at de Croteau for half a minute, and then was inspired to suggest:

"S'pose ye leave yer hoss here with me. Ye ain't goin' to try to skip an' lose a chance to make a screamin' big pile of money. Without a hoss ye couldn't git nowhere, even if ye was fool 'nough to try it.

"Leave yer critter here, an' there'll be no need of my taggin' along. My orders wa'n't drawn to sich a fine p'int that I don't have some say-so as to how they should be carried out."

As de Croteau already had bolted his breakfast he readily agreed to this proposal, and without further loss of time he set off afoot for the cabin. He met no one on the way, and had approached within a few rods of the cabin before he discovered any signs of life aside from the blue smoke lazily rising from the chimney. The smoke told him that there was to be a change in the weather, that rain was coming. He glimpsed a face at the window, and the next moment the door was open and Francine was smiling a welcome.

"HOW'S the invalid? I know he's better, because you look rested."

"He's sitting up in bed, just finishing his breakfast," was the joyous reply.

"Good! I must see him and talk with him. We must work fast."

"I was almost forgetting our danger," she sighed. "I was so amazed and delighted with the progress he's made in the last twelve hours that I forgot the troubles outside the cabin. Come in. I've told him all our talk. He's anxious to see you."

As de Croteau stepped inside she closed and barred the door, whispering—

"To keep out Eliza."

Then she passed between the curtains and brought out some dishes and motioned for him to enter. Rodney was sitting up and showing great improvement. Without a word he clasped the young man's hand. De Croteau said—

"Let's look at the shoulder."

He removed the bandages and was pleased to observe the condition of the wounds. The inflammation had subsided, and the torn flesh had settled down to the work of healing itself.

"I'm glad you didn't obey my orders about staying away until we were better acquainted," said Rodney.

"I had to see you before we could get acquainted," laughed de Croteau.

Then he replaced the bandages, seated himself on the edge of the bed and rapidly described the scene at the Knob and the subterfuge he had adopted to gain time. The girl gave a little cry of dismay as he revealed the rôle her father must play, but Rodney accepted it philosophically, and with a grim smile said:

"A good choice. About the only one you could make and hold their interest. But the samples? How did you manage that?"

Oh, I happened to have some new bills. Baker knows they're genuine, and we haven't any time to lose. Bender and the others don't want to believe them genuine, as that means they lose a fortune. But the truth will out once they send some to Springfield.

"Bender distrusts Baker for various reasons. It's his greed and his dislike for Baker which gives us our chance."

"How much time have we?" Rodney nervously asked.

"They believe you are sick. They'll let you alone for two or three days. Baker tried a silly trick on me, but it won't work. Bender's put a guard over me for the day, but it's only a form. He didn't even come here with me. Baker has a double guard. The men are ordered to shoot him on sight if he appears without them. So he won't come here for a day or so.

"But there's another bother that may come any time. Rain. Once it rains traveling will be hard, speed impossible. We must work fast."

"We'll be ready when you say the word. My daughter's told me of your kindness. We're indebted to you. Perhaps I can do something for you later on. I think I am licensed to say that I'm on terms of intimate friendship with your Governor. It does seem as if your trouble could be cleared away. Your friends should be able to prove it was in self-defense."

"I haven't any doubt on that point," cried de Croteau, his heart warming at the thought of being restored to society. "The boys were anxious for me to run for it, and run I did. Even at that I would have stuck and faced it. Well, everything considered it seemed best I should get out."

Francine watched him curiously. Her father gravely said: "It's very lucky for me

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and my daughter that you made that decision, and yet it was foolish of you to run away. Francine says you know about that man—Leroy."

"You told part when you were out of your head. She told the rest. You were most fortunate to escape as you did."

"I was dazed. He struck me three times with his knife before I could move," muttered Rodney. "My brain was paralyzed. It was the girl's outcry that set my wits in motion. He was a poisonous snake. I'm glad he's dead. It was his life, or the girl's and mine. He was entirely without mercy.

"He had his orders to kill the two of us. For him to fail made him liable to the death penalty. Anything new about his disappearance?"

De Croteau lowered his gaze, finding it hard to speak. The girl guessed the truth, and whispered—

"They found him?"

He nodded; then lifted his head and warned:

"That blanket. It's their only clue. If you have any more like them you must burn them and throw the ashes outdoors. Baker will surely get around to accusing you, sir."

"It's the only one of its kind," said the girl. "We must get away before that man comes here."

"I can ride now," Rodney eagerly declared.

"We lack two horses," de Croteau reminded him. "It'll take a day to get two."

"But how? Where?" anxiously demanded the girl.

"That's a little detail I'll work out," he replied with a false show of confidence.

Then he fell to frowning as he tried to see his way through the dilemma.

"If we could get away from this place on foot, if only for a few miles—" she murmured, hoping to help him. "If we could hide in the woods until you got the horses——"

"No," he sharply retorted. "The horses must be secured before you leave. Once you're gone they'll comb the country for you. I'll be taken along with them and lose my chance to help. Besides, your father can't stay in the woods after the rains come. Leave it for me to figure on. The best thing you can do, sir, while waiting is to practise walking back and forth inside here.

"Miss Francine, keep Eliza Crake outside. Tell her your father is asleep. If Baker calls stand him off with the rifle. I don't believe there's any danger of Bender coming for several days. It's only right that I should warn you two that Bender is interested."

RODNEY did not sense his meaning at first; but the girl colored warmly and asked—

"Interested in *me?*"

De Croteau bowed; then more cheerfully:

"But perhaps it's best that way. If he wasn't he'd leave Baker a clear field and a free hand. As it is you'll have a day or so."

"You're clipping down the time," she shuddered. "You said before we'd have two or three days."

"We'll have today and tomorrow anyway," de Croteau compromised. "My guard will be removed late this afternoon. I'll spend the day in planning how to get two horses. If you're able to ride, sir, we ought to start tomorrow night."

"If we only could!" cried the girl, her nerves beginning to give way as she surrendered to the belief that an early escape was possible. "Oh, if we only could!"

"Get the horses and I'll ride," assured Rodney. "If I were a dead man I'd sit a horse and ride out of this death-trap. It's settled! We'll start tomorrow night. Now for some definite plan as to our course."

"It would be the easiest to cut south across the border," said de Croteau.

The girl flatly refused to consider it.

"We would be taken before we could make any sizable settlement. It would be a miracle if we reached Little Rock. Why not strike to the east?"

"Rain's coming. We'd find ourselves mired, cold, shelterless; and the last stretch would take us through swamps where we'd have to depend upon a boat."

He wrinkled his brows and mentally reviewed the route he had followed in reaching the creek. He did not fancy it. It would necessitate their riding through hostile country with a poor chance to hide if hard pressed.

"Not that way," he muttered.

Then aloud:

"We must take the most direct path to the mountains. That means we must strike due north, crossing the upper waters of the Big North Fork of the White River and

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then swing to the west, crossing Bryant's Creek. We must dodge around Rockbridge and strike into the Hartsville road. Mr. Rodney, you know the paths for ten miles beyond the Knob?"

"Only the one I followed in going to and returning from the hills."

"And that one takes us very close to Bender's place," remonstrated the girl.

"And unfortunately I don't know of any trail that would lead us around his cabin," added Rodney.

"It's the road to take," persisted de Croteau.

Then his face lighted and he declared:

"Just the thing! They'd never think of looking for us there. His cabin shall be our first stopping-place. None of the gang ever goes there, and he's sure to be down here on the creek for the next few days. He has two horses up there—Leroy's animals.

"You can ride my horse, sir, if I can't get two animals without betraying our scheme. Red Shot will carry double. Miss Francine can ride with you. The walk will be a joke for me."

He was much elated with this new plan.

"It seems very dangerous to go to that man's house," protested the girl.

"It'll be perfectly safe if we know he's down here when we start. That'll be the last direction they'll suspect us of taking. We can make it!"

The girl was studying his face eagerly and she believed that despite his optimistic assurance a doubt was reflected in his eyes.

"What is it?" she gently asked. "What have you discovered to be wrong with your plan?"

"Nothing for certain," he answered. "Nothing that won't apply to any other plan. I happened to think of Crake's dogs. But that's borrowing trouble. All we ask is a few hours' start. It may be hours before they discover we're gone. Even then they might waste time riding east, west and south before thinking to cast about with the dogs to find our trail.

"Of course what's going to give them their first clue to our flight is my absence. If you two could take Red Shot and make the cabin alone and trust to me to overtake you——"

"No!" firmly interrupted the girl. "You'd be suspected, convicted and killed. They'd soon learn your horse was gone. They'd know you supplied him. We won't listen to that. Please say no more. The dogs aren't as bad as the man Bender. If we can risk going to his cabin we'll risk the dogs."

"Then that's settled. Now I must be going; Bender will be calling on me."

The girl followed him to the door, her face glowing with excitement at the prospect of escaping from her terrible worry.

"Do be careful," she begged. "I'm awfully selfish."

"In serving you and your father I'm only serving myself," he told her.

"You've been mighty good to us. I was disagreeable at first—about your trouble. Now I understand how it was. The lesson has been brought home to me. You'll forget all the things I said, won't you?"

"Bless you, yes," he laughingly assured her.

"This seems to be a man's world, a fighting world after all," she continued. "And men must do as they do until the world grows better."

Then with some embarrassment she added:

"It seems almost worse for father to pretend to be a counterfeiter than to have killed Leroy. A counterfeiter is a thief on a large scale."

"A thief is about the lowest form of the human worm," he readily agreed; and somehow he was glad he had not told of Baker's efforts to bring that particular shame upon him. Regardless of how absurd the accusation was or how evil the source from which it emanated, it had stung his self-respect.

"A man may kill and yet be clean," she slowly replied. "But a thief is always a thief, and that means a coward. A woman can forgive almost anything but cowardice.

"Well, I'm keeping you while you should be busy with our affairs. I can never forget your willingness to help us, two strangers."

"You're the only honest strangers I've met. It's a great privilege to be at your service," he assured her.

"I shall count the minutes until you come for us. Anything is better than suspense. You want to go back now?"

"I've always wanted to go back. I never wanted to come. There were circumstances that made it seem best. All the pressure seemed to be for me to go, rather than to stay. I know now I could not dodge anything by running away. I simply brought my trouble down here where I had no friends."

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"We're poor friends, yet we are your friends," she earnestly told him. "Perhaps after we get back to civilization we can show we're helpful friends."

"Oh, you've done that a million-fold, Miss Francine, already. Just the privilege of being of some help has been the biggest thing that could have happened to me. You don't know what it's meant to me to have found you here."

"Good-by, and good luck," she murmured, retreating to the door.

"Feed your father all he can eat. Have him walk. Keep the curtains drawn. Let no one enter. The gang won't harm him now; he's too precious. Keep a high heart. And always remember I'm eternally indebted to you for just being *you*."

She took his proffered hand, and color surged into her pale cheeks. De Croteau was wondrously uplifted as he walked down the path. He had seen her face glorified by a hint of happiness. Given peace, how splendid Francine Rodney would be!

WITH the dangers thickening he yet found a strange buoyancy filling his heart as he hurried to reach the cabin. He could not analyze his emotions, nor did he dare try; he knew only that the world once more was a desirable place and that it was good to be alive. Possibly Rodney's promise to use his influence in having the homicide charge removed had much to do with his sudden optimism; or the miracle of pale cheeks becoming pink may have been a contributing cause.

For the first time since arriving at Wolf Creek he began whistling to express his spirits. He was whistling when he reached the cabin. He waved his hand genially to Scannon lounging on the grass before the door and continued to whistle, only now he gave the signal for Red Shot to come to him and be petted.

The horse did not respond. He repeated the signal and waited, his brows frowning in perplexity.

"That's funny," he said to Scannon, who was watching him curiously. "He never ranges so far that he can't hear my whistle. The rascal must be playing truant."

He was pursing his lips for another effort when Scannon astounded him by saying—

"Hoss gone."

"Gone? Red Shot gone?" de Croteau dully repeated.

"Bender's orders. Crake took him."

"Took my horse?" incredulously cried de Croteau, his mind refusing for the moment to comprehend the situation.

"Bender's orders. Crake took him right after you left here," mumbled Scannon.

De Croteau would have resented it less if the gang had tried to assassinate him from ambush.

"I'll kill Crake and I'll kill Bender if any harm comes to that horse," he hoarsely shouted.

Bender appeared in the doorway behind Scannon and calmly informed him:

"Yer nag's all right. He'll be fetched back by 'n' by. Don't make threats. I'm yer boss. I can take yer life jest as easy as I can take yer hoss. Keep shet."

"But why did you have Crake steal my horse?" cried de Croteau, advancing to the cabin.

"I'll cut yer comb, ye young fool, if ye raise yer voice to me," whined Bender, one hand resting on the haft of a knife. "I said he took yer hoss. He didn't steal him. So ye forgit that loud voice. I ain't deef."

"There must be some reason for it. I'd like to know," said de Croteau, speaking more calmly.

"There's a reason, and a good one, for everything I do. Baker has two guards, what cling to him like burs. Ye're free to go round and visit folks and be right neighborly.

"Crake took yer hoss up to the openin', where the one-armed cuss is buried. He hated to go there like sin, even in the daytime. But he knows *me*. Now he's on his way to Gainesville. He'll be back 'bout sundown. If he don't find nothin'——"

"He can't. That notice was one of Baker's tricks."

"Then ye won't have nothin' to yap 'bout. Yer hoss will be fetched back and the guard removed. Ye use that highty-tighty way with me ag'in and I'll see what's inside yer craw.

"Scannon, take a walk for a bit. Me 'n' this young painter must have a talk."

Scannon leaped up and hurried down the creek path. De Croteau became cool-headed again. After all his plans were not disarranged. The horse would be brought back before he would want to use him. Nor could he forget that he had been favored by Bender. He apologized:

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"I was thrown off my balance. I feel that Red Shot is about the only friend I have left. I think a heap of him. I want him back. But what you say goes of course."

"I ruther opine so," said Bender, seating himself on the doorstep and locking his long arms about his knees. "But I didn't come here to talk 'bout yer hoss. I've been thinkin'."

De Croteau studied him warily. There was almost a suggestion of timidity in his bearing, and it might be part of a trick. The twisted face was averted and was smiling in a peculiar manner. De Croteau decided he was a trifle alarmed at this new phase of the man; he preferred him in a more open rôle, even though it be a violent one.

Bender darted a glance at him and with a little snicker confessed:

"I've been thinkin' 'bout that gal at Rodney's. Baker's upset 'bout her. And it 'pears ye, too, are keen to git over there bright 'n' early.

"I can't have any fightin' 'atween my men over a woman. So I've been thinkin'. I 'low the time has come."

He drew a deep breath as if relieved at having told this much.

"Time has come for what?" slowly asked de Croteau, his heart shrinking from the answer he knew he would receive.

"For me to take a woman. I'll take the Rodney gal," shrilly cried Bender, and as he spoke he suddenly darted his long neck forward, his caricature of a face becoming a fixed mask through which his eyes gleamed wickedly.

De Croteau held himself under control, his features remaining impassive. He forced himself to say:

"I was afraid you'd decided to take my horse for keeps. You'll take the Rodney girl; what of it?"

THE challenge faded from the angular visage and with a simpering laugh, something entirely new in his deportment de Croteau believed, he said:

"It ain't good for man to live alone. Circuit rider once said that. I heard him. But I've always stood aside while t'other men took the women. Now it's my turn."

"She may not want to be taken," remarked de Croteau.

For a moment Bender's gaze was lurid; then with the same silly laugh he assured the other:

"Women always like masterful men. I'd be good to the right woman. This gal will think a heap of me after we git 'quainted. I've made myself keep away from her cabin after my first sight of her. I wanted to be sure she's the right one. Now I know she is."

"But she dislikes Baker, and she doesn't want me. Why bother her?"

"I might tell ye that it would be a master move to have her hitched to me so's her pap wouldn't try to run away, or say he wouldn't turn out paper money for us. It's the best trick I could play to keep him here and willin' to work his head off for us. It would 'a' come to that even if I didn't take the gal for myself.

"Truth is, I'm lonely. I don't trust to have any of the gang round me. And I'm lonely 's a painter what's lost his mate. I've been lonely all my life. I'm —— tired of it. And I've always stood aside. Now it's my turn, and I'll kill the man who gits in front of me."

As he uttered the last he became all ferocity.

"Keep that tucked away in the front of yer head, de Croteau, where ye can always be chawin' it over. Baker'll git the same word. I'll kill the man who gits in front of me."

"I've not tried to get the girl," de Croteau shortly replied. "You waste your breath in threatening me. But have your knife ready for Baker."

"I'll do for Baker tonight. After Crake gits back. Ye can come along and watch me do it if ye hanker to."

De Croteau made no reply. Bender's sudden decision to appropriate Francine was most monstrous, yet in a measure de Croteau had been prepared for it. After all it mattered nothing what Bender planned to do as all his amorous designs would be abortive once Red Shot was returned and night abetted flight. Give him his horse and a decent lead and he would soon place a geographical barrier between the girl and all the menaces of Wolf Creek.

Bender watched him and wondered what was in his mind. At last the leader broke the silence by saying—

"Baker sticks to it 'bout that reward offer."

"He's a clumsy liar," de Croteau answered absent-mindedly.

"—— if I don't believe in ye!" cried

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Bender. "I had a talk with Baker last night after ye quit the Knob. I'll admit he almost had me shaky in my mind for a spell; for I told him p'int blank it would go hard with him if I found he was lyin'. He weakened some though. He 'lowed that there mayn't be notices posted in Gainesville, and that to make it a square test a man oughter be sent to Springfield."

"He wants to gain time. They'd find none in Springfield," quietly replied de Croteau.

"It does me good to hear ye say that. Ye understand, de Croteau, that if ye'd come here and told us how ye'd skipped out with some money we'd go to admire ye for it. We'd 'a' tooken our share and made ye one of us. What would make us r'ar up and act bad would be to l'arn that ye'd lied to us and was hawgin' it all after lettin' us pretect ye."

"I understand. Send a man or two to Springfield by all means. But after you hear from Gainesville please send back my horse."

"I'll have him back tonight after Crake fetches word there ain't no notices posted in Gainesville. I'm mortal glad ye ain't cut up 'bout that gal. Gals 'nough in the world for all of us, but that one jest tickles my notions of what a woman should be. We'll pick ye out a likely-lookin' one down in Arkansas the next time we cross the border.

"Well, I'll be moseyin' round a bit. Hi, Scannon. Come back here."

And when the man came up on the run he added—

"Ye needn't bother de Croteau too close with yer company when he don't want it."

"He does the talkin'," growled Scannon. "Talk sounds mighty good. That paper money'll be the best job we ever done."

Bender nodded and walked to where his horse was feeding behind the cabin. He rode down the creek path, and de Croteau feared he might be going to the Rodney cabin, but dared not follow him. Had he done so he would have been relieved to see the outlaw cross the creek and ride in the direction of the Crake place.

Then followed his most trying day on the Creek. He wanted to go to the Rodney cabin, but discretion held him back. Scannon would interpose no objection and would not offer to accompany him. But should Bender return before nightfall he would promptly learn of the second visit and might decide to take the girl without further delay.

The loss of the horse, although only temporary, also told on de Croteau's spirits. He knew that the animal would suffer nothing, but he could not be at ease until he knew his whistle would bring an answering whinny and the scamper of swift hoofs.

It was amazing to realize how thoroughly the creek was under the autocratic control of one man. Baker had been the first to display any independence, and he would suffer for it, de Croteau decided. The last thought was very pleasing. He feared Bender; he hated Baker.

Scannon was hungry for further talk about counterfeit money, and ventured to put a few questions as to the amount of bogus bills it would be possible to turn off. De Croteau capitulated, believing talk would help pass away the time. He proceeded to form estimates of quantity production and made his hearer's mind reel in an ecstasy of good feeling. By midday every one in the gang was a millionaire.

"That's the most heartenin' talk I ever heard," sighed Scannon as he cooked the dinner.

"We can double that figure by simply turning out notes of double the value," de Croteau lazily reminded him. Scannon dropped the skillet of bear bacon and rapturously exclaimed an oath.

DURING the afternoon de Croteau interlarded his talk with careless queries. As Scannon was off his guard from brooding over the coming prosperity he divulged several bits of information about hill travel which de Croteau was glad to learn. Half-way along the road from Rockbridge to Hartsville, or where the road touched upon Clarke's Creek, one could take a path running due west through the post-oak lands, cross the Gasconade and make Springfield without striking Hartsville. He also intimated that, besides Baker, Whills and Hask were uneasy under Bender's command and would have "to toe the mark right smart or stop livin'." De Croteau gathered from other fragments of information that Bender had foreseen the end of outlawry in southern Missouri and Arkansas and would, if it were not for the counterfeiting scheme, soon be

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on his way to the Southwest, accompanied by the choicer members of his gang.

In this connection Scannon exulted:

"An' now it ain't got to be done. This new game let's us all stay here an' hunt 'n' trap 'n' tramp the hills we're used to. We can live like gen'lemen an' have shingle-roofs an' glass in th' winders."

To remain there and turn to honest callings had never cut the periphery of the fellow's slender imagination.

Toward sundown de Croteau announced his intention of taking a nap and directed Scannon to arouse him in three hours. He went inside, lay down on his blankets and was soon asleep.

A lighted candle held close to his eyes awakened him. He was annoyed to have slept so long. As he rose to a sitting posture and rubbed his eyes he mumbled.

"Why didn't you wake me up, Scannon? Have they brought Red Shot back?"

He was stupefied at being picked bodily from the blankets and hurled against the wall. With a cry of rage he dispelled the last vestige of sleep from his brain and glared about him. Scannon, with his mouth opened like a cat-fish, was holding the candle. Beside him stood Bender, his malevolent features screwed up in a grimace of terrible fury.

"Want yer hoss, do ye? He's up to my cabin, and there he stays," screamed Bender, leaning forward with his long fingers curved like hooks. "Wake ye up, ye low-down lyin' dawg! I'll rib ye!"

With an answering defiance but without the slightest idea as to what had caused the transformation in the man, de Croteau leaped to attack. As he jumped Bender sprang to meet him. De Croteau felt the ape-like arms tossing him about; then he was hurled against the logs and slumped breathless to the floor.

"Try it on yer betters agin,' ye thief!" yelled Bender's quavering voice.

From the doorway of the cabin came a triumphant laugh.

De Croteau remained quiet, waiting to get back his wind before trying to rise. Baker stood by the door, his face lighted up with fierce enjoyment. Over his shoulders peered the grinning faces of Whills and Hask.

"Are you drunk or crazy, Bender, to act like this," Croteau managed to gasp out, gazing longingly at his belt of weapons across the room.

For an answer Bender shot forward his long arm, seized de Croteau by the neck, yanked him to the middle of the floor, dropped a paper before him, forced his face against it and screamed:

"Read it, ye sneakin' liar! It was fetched back from Gainesville by Crake. Read it!"

He released his hold so de Croteau could lift his head and stare at a duplicate of the notice produced at the Knob by Baker.

"Baker put it up in Gainesville. He had several struck off. He probably put them all up along the road," de Croteau hoarsely defended himself.

"We'll nail that lie afore it gits cold. Crake!" yelled Bender.

Crake burst through the doorway, his face the color of old linen.

"What 'd ye find out at Gainesville? The truth, or I'll make yer woman a widder in three seconds!"

"There was two of 'em posted there," answered Crake's trembling voice. "The post-office feller said a sheriff's officer stuck 'em up."

De Croteau stared at the paper dumbfounded. He knew that Crake was telling the truth. And yet the thing was impossible. There was not a word about the killing. He was wanted for stealing. He was posted as a thief. And Francine Rodney had said all thieves were cowards.

"I never stole this money—" he slowly began.

With a wild animal howl Bender jerked him to his feet. De Croteau was strong and had prided himself on his ability to take care of himself. But now he was as helpless as a boy of ten. He fought blindly; but Bender was all over him, and inside half a minute had lifted him from the floor and had hurled him back on to his blankets with a force that knocked the breath from his body.

"Now open yer yawp ag'in and I won't wait till the gang gits here, but I'll kill ye with my bare hands."

Baker laughed heartily, and remarked:

"You bluffed well for a bit, de Croteau. You even had me fooled for a while. But the truth always prevails. I don't think we'll see any more of that high-cockalorum air."

"Baker, shet yer meat-trap," panted Bender. "I'm tryin' to keep from killin' this fool till we can l'arn where he hid the money. We'll have it. We'll bleed him

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dry. We'll roast the truth outer him. Then we'll plant him alongside yer one-armed friend.

"Whills and Hask, ye stay here on guard. Scannon, ye ride and spread word for the boys to git here on the jump. Crake, ye help him. They must be here bright 'n' early tomorrer mornin' at the latest. I want this business finished up afore I take a wife. Ride all night, but git 'em here.

"I'm goin' teach the gang a lesson. I want 'em to l'arn what happens when a man tries to make a fool of Knife Bender."

CHAPTER XI

THE TRADERS

WITH the world tumbling down about his ears de Croteau remained on the blankets endeavoring to collect his dazed wits and to determine definitely whether it were nightmare or reality he was experiencing; for the force of his fall had partially stunned him. After his mind cleared he remained quiescent and tried to comprehend the printed notice brought back by Crake. There was no imagining that he had seen the notice, for it was there on the floor, a damnatory blur of black and white.

He could not understand why the sheriff of Greene County should have branded him a thief. Bushrod Williams was a man of probity. De Croteau had known him and liked him ever since making Springfield his home. It was incredible and monstrous that such a charge should be brought against him. It it were not for Crake's declaration that a sheriff's officer had posted the notices de Croteau would have persisted in his belief that the whole thing was one of Baker's games.

It was not until some minutes after Bender and Baker had vanished into the night that the urgent peril of the girl swamped all other thoughts. Bender would take her for his woman on the morrow.

The Greene County sheriff and the slanderous notice were forgotten. He started to spring up and give instant battle to the grinning Whills and sardonic Hask, but remembered himself in time to groan and writhe as if in great physical agony, and to drop limply back on the blankets.

"Boss took th' tuck outer ye, sort of," remarked Hask, lifting the rifle from his knees and leaning it against the wall behind him.

"Jest wait till th' boss gits round to yer case after sunup," exulted Whills. "What's happened ain't a flea-bite to what's comin'. I've seen him r'iled afore now, when he was keen to kill, but nothin' like this. If ye had a million dollars ye couldn't buy yer life of him."

"He's a master hand at makin' folks talk turkey," added Hask, his old eyes lighting at the mention of money.

"Meaning he'll make me tell about the twenty-five thousand?" weakly asked de Croteau.

It was his first intelligent move toward freedom, and it was prompted by the avarice showing in Hask's old face. Whills was staring at them, and de Croteau fancied that he too was entertaining greedy thoughts.

"Ye never brought no twenty-five thousand dollars to this crick," said Hask, watching the pale face to detect any denial of his assertion.

"Do you suppose he'd call it quits for the twenty-five thousand?" eagerly asked de Croteau.

"For twenty-five thousand, an' yer throat well cut," was Whills' cold-blooded reply. "I've told ye once ye couldn't buy him off with a million."

"Then he can kill me, but he won't get the money."

Hask laughed, Whills cried:

"Ye fool! Knife Bender has ways with him that would make a Injun want to take lessons. He'll have th' money, an' ye'll be beggin' him for a quick death inside five minutes after he gits to operatin'."

De Croteau shuddered. He would die on the morrow unless he escaped this night. And as there was no twenty-five thousand dollars he must die all the more hideously.

If it were not for the girl he would have attacked his two guards and had it over with quickly. So long as he had a minute of life left he must dedicate it to her and her helplessness; and the thought of his hard lot and of her worse fate turned his face a sickly gray.

"He was telling me this morning how he would take a few men and strike for Texas," he groaned. "I was to be one of them. Now it's all spoiled. He was going to take Rodney along, too. He said Baker and one or two others would be left behind as he didn't trust them."

"Ye're a liar! He thinks a heap of Baker. Makes him his right-hand man 'cause he

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knows something," growled Whills, yet exchanging a worried glance with Hask.

"Baker's smart, but he knows too much to suit Bender," said de Croteau. "You know it, too. Bender wants to be the brains for the whole gang. Baker has a way of skimping orders."

He closed his eyes as if exhausted. Whills glanced at Hask and raised his bushy brows. Hask nodded. Whills cleared his throat and said:

"Mebbe it ain't for me to give th' lie to a man as good as dead—worse off'n dead if Knife Bender has his way. Twenty-five thousand dollars will buy a heap of things. Sometimes it'll buy a life."

"If Baker was boss I reckon he'd trade, even if he doesn't like me," murmured de Croteau. "One thing's sure; no man gets it if I have to die."

Whills and Hask conversed further with their eyes. Then Whills leaned forward and whispered—

"Could a man git it—git it quick, right off—if ye knew it meant life for ye?"

"I'd be a fool not to trade," was the faint reply. "A man can sometimes get another parcel of money, but he has only one life."

Whills rose and tiptoed to the door, and placed his ear against the stout oak. Hask reconnoitered for possible eavesdroppers at the two windows. Whills returned and nervously said:

"Then name th' place where it's hid an' ye can dig out. Bender don't 'low to take me 'n' Hask along with him, so there's nothin' to hinder our streakin' off by ourselves. Is that right, Hask?"

"Dead center," was the emphatic approval.

DE CROTEAU slowly shifted his position and rested on one elbow. His gaze dwelt on the two men for a moment and then made sure the two handguns were in the belt across the room. They believed he was weighing their offer, whereas he was flogging his wits to discover a ruse which would enable him to move twelve feet before he could be killed. He must secure the guns in order to escape.

He had considered distracting their attention and leaping to the door; but the door was barred and before he could unfasten it and leap into the darkness they would be upon him, or pumping lead into his back. The windows were too small to serve for a hasty exit.

"Cat got yer tongue?" growled Hask.

"I was thinking," mumbled de Croteau.

"Ye seem sorter slow to trade," said Whills.

"I'm keen to trade, but I'm trying to decide how far you fellows are to be trusted," de Croteau returned. "Then again, there's the chance of Bender changing his mind before morning. He's mighty mad tonight, but men don't stay mad."

"So that's the game, eh?" muttered Whills. "Ye reckon on havin' a story to tell th' boss 'bout me 'n' Hask bein' ready to do him a bad turn."

"Nonsense. I could tell that much even if it was a lie."

Hask motioned for Whills to subside and harshly said:

"De Croteau, don't be a fool. No man can cross Knife Bender and ever fix it up with him. Th' more he's favored a man, th' more mad he gits when he turns ag'in' that man. There's a streak of Injun in him. A new notch for his knife-handle is as good as made. Jest as sure as th' sun rises tomorrer over Wolf Crick, jest as sartain is it th' last sunup ye'll ever see."

"But how shall we do it? How can I do my part and feel sure you'll do yours?"

"Simple like. Jest spit out where th' money's hid without wastin' more time. One of us can go for it. If ye've told th' truth ye can light out th' minute th' money's found."

Whills added:

"If it's some ways from here, too far to make an' return afore sunup, we'll take ye along with us. If we find ye in a lie we'll fetch ye back an' let on ye made a break for it an' 'most got away."

De Croteau grimaced and slowly worked into a sitting posture, his feet resting squarely on the floor, his hands thrust out on the sides as if to hold his body erect. Whills resumed:

"Ye'll have to talk right smart. We ain't got only so much time."

"It can be managed mighty quickly if you fellows will act square," de Croteau slowly informed them.

"We never went back on a bargain yet," solemnly protested Hask.

"Once we git th' money why should we want ye in hot water? We'd rather dig out an' leave Bender to think that p'raps

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ye got away an' we didn't dast stay an' face him. To kill ye an' leave ye here would show we'd got th' money. An' that would make it bad for us if we ever met up with Bender down in Texas."

"I reckon I'll risk it," decided de Croteau.

And he got on his feet with a groan. He dared not glance toward his guns, but he thrilled as he realized that he was erect and needed but a few seconds of uninterrupted freedom. Gathering himself for a leap, he pointed to the hiding-place of the paper money and directed—

"Lift that stone at the right of the hearth."

But his chance did not come with this all-important disclosure. The very surprize of the rascals to hear that the money was inside the cabin defeated his purpose. For after gaping at him in astonishment for a few moments Whills alone moved toward the hiding-place while Hask remained blocking the path to the guns. Nor was this because of Hask's superior sense of caution; he was simply less quick to react to the astounding information.

De Croteau held his breath and waited for Hask to join his companion. Hask remained, staring stupidly first at the sunken stone and then at de Croteau.

It was maddening to see the looked-for opportunity fail him. Whills pulled out a knife and deftly removed the stone. The sight of the thick package caused him to utter guttural sounds, like a wild beast worrying its kill.

"——! It's here!" he gasped.

NOW surely the way would be cleared, thought de Croteau; and again his reasoning was proven to be at fault. He had looked for cupidity overcoming the bonds of friendship. He firmly expected that Hask would jump to the fireplace to snatch at the prize. Instead Hask remained motionless; and Whills, his eyes glittering with an evil purpose, straightened without touching the money. Instead of gazing into the cache he was studying de Croteau's face. Without glancing toward his companion he aroused Hask from his stupor by directing:

"Hask, git it out an' count it. We must be quick."

Then with two strides he was close to de Croteau and had shoved a notched gun under the young man's nose. As Hask dropped on his knees to open the package and count the money Whills gloated:

"Once afore this I asked ye to count these notches. Ye 'lowed ye felt above doin' it. Th' boss, —— him, busted in an' sp'iled my play.

"Know what I'm goin' to do? I'm goin' to count 'em for ye. Goin' to be perlite. There's jest seven of 'em. When I finish th' count I'm goin' to add th' eighth by blowin' off th' top of yer head. If ye make a move, even as much as wink a eye, I'll shoot ye an' finish my count afterwards."

"But you promised——"

"Promises to dawgs don't count," chuckled Whills. "It was a bit of our fun. Ye're a dead man anyway. Why, ye fool, even if we turned ye loose d'ye s'pose ye'd git clear of th' crick? No hoss to ride an' Crake's dawgs to foller ye! Ye'd be picked up afore mornin'.

"Ye ain't got nothin' to growl 'bout. Ye've made a derned good bargain. Ye've swapped one of Knife Bender's slow deaths for a quick one. It's right smart good trade ye've made. If we was cruel we could tie ye up an' leave ye for Bender to fuss with.

"Now this is notch number one. My first killin', an' I was a younker. He was a storekeeper an' was slow in handin' over th' strong-box. Number two was a half-breed up in th' hills. Sometimes I feel 'shamed to have counted him. Number three——"

"——! There's a scant two thousand here!" roared Hask.

"Count what you put in your pocket," cried de Croteau, glaring over Whills' shoulder.

Whills started to turn his head, then remembered and checked himself; but not before de Croteau's left hand had closed on his wrist. The next moment the prisoner's right hand was tearing the revolver loose. With a howl of fear Whills broke away, grabbed for his second gun and shouted the one word—

"Help!"

De Croteau dropped to the floor and fired even while Whills was tugging the gun clear of his belt. Whills went down before Hask could get into action.

Hask and de Croteau fired together. Pitching forward on his face, Hask managed to cock his weapon, but died before he

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could discharge it. De Croteau fired at him a second time to make sure, and then with one frantic spring was across the cabin and belting on his guns.

Securing his rifle, he knocked the candle to the floor, extinguishing it. He reached the door and unbarred it, then remembered the money. He turned back and fumbled under Hask's body and gathered up the bank-notes and then slipped over the threshold. Crouching low, he made for the big walnut-tree in which he had concealed his gold.

After waiting to learn if the sound of the shots had spread an alarm he dipped his hand into the hollow and pulled out the heavy bag of coins. Dropping it inside his shirt, he ran around the north end of the cabin and stole away from the creek path, traveling to the east. Each moment he expected to hear the angry shouts of his enemies advertising that his flight was known. But as he penetrated deeper into the woods he began to believe that the miracle had happened; he was free without any signs of an immediate pursuit.

His courage increased with this new hope; or rather, his courage became intelligent instead of expressing a spasmodic recklessness. He had concentrated intensely on each second in the cabin; now he allowed his mind to look ahead and apportion the night to the best advantage. If no harm had befallen the Rodneys his original scheme would be carried out.

He visualized it as a steep road leading to the top of a peak and then descending on the opposite side. The top of the peak was the getting the Rodneys clear of their cabin unobserved. He had no horse, and it might be a hopeless endeavor to start with Rodney traveling afoot. But there are things much worse than death. Also, his victory over the two guards had aroused all the resilient qualities of his nature.

When he had moved half a mile back from the creek he turned to the south and followed an old game trail. He wished to approach the Rodney cabin from the woods in the rear of it. He proposed to lead father and daughter over the same course in his desperate essay to make Bender's cabin before daylight.

To get the two into the woods was the peak of his trouble, he believed. Bender's lonely home and the three horses were on the opposite side of the peak.

HE TRAVELED briskly, his rifle locating the wall of bushes ahead, his feet feeling out the trodden ribbon of dirt. At last the barrel of the rifle plunged into a thicket, warning of no thoroughfare. He felt about with his feet and learned that the trail forked at right angles, leading to the east and west. He turned toward the creek, believing that he was almost in line with the Rodney place.

He advanced only a short distance before a noise ahead brought him to a halt. Something was coming toward him, brushing against the bushes as it advanced. It was large enough to fill the narrow trail and could not be a wild animal, unless it was a bear returning to a patch of cane. But a bear, he knew, would have smelled him long before this and would have noiselessly surrendered the path. It must be a horse. Instead of an obstacle it would prove a great help.

He drew a gun and pressed to one side of the trail, however, on hearing the murmur of some one talking. There was more than one man with the animal, and de Croteau had small desire to betray himself in an encounter against such odds. He reluctantly relinquished his plan and pressed a few feet deeper into the growth to allow the men to pass.

He began holding his breath when the animal was almost upon him, for he realized the possibility that the pursuit was on and being conducted more cunningly than he had anticipated.

The horse gave a snort of fear and threshed about awkwardly. A child lifted a shrill plaint. Then a woman's voice was saying—

"Hawkins County Crake, keep shet, or I'll lambaste you. Ain't it bad 'nough for this fool critter to go cuttin' up in his old age without you younkers a-yowlin' an' a-howlin'? You all keep shet or Knife Bender'll git you."

This threat had a quieting effect, and Mrs. Crake groaned:

"Glory be! But if your blessed pap would only finish his business an' take after us I'd be a happy woman."

"Where's pap?" wailed a childish treble.

"Never you mind where he is, Madison County. But you can be sure he's a man of grit this night. Lawd, what a masterful man! I didn't no more'n read that letter than he was all for showin' his gumption.

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Always remember, children, that your pap has more real spunk then ary man on the crick. Whoa, you contraptuous lummox!"

The last to the horse, which was showing a disinclination to advance by de Croteau's hiding-place.

"Mrs. Crake, this is de Croteau speaking," softly announced de Croteau.

With a little shriek accompanied by the click of gun-hammer Eliza warned:

"No tricks on me this night, whoever you may be. My gran'ma'am killed a b'ar with a ax once, an' there ain't been no coward bred in our fambly since then. Where be you? Who be you?"

He repeated his name and stepped into the trail and made out a vague mass, which he knew must be the horse and the Crakes.

"What are you doing out here alone with your children at this time of night?" he demanded.

Mrs. Crake began to weep, and between sobs begged:

"Don't tell on us. It's much as our lives is worth. Little Polk County 'n' Madison County 'n' Hawkins County will be left without no folks, with nothin' but the dawgs, if you tell on us."

"But what have you done?" impatiently asked de Croteau.

"We're quittin'. We're comin' off the crick."

The children began weeping bitterly.

"Hush, hush! Drat you for young limbs!" hissed Mrs. Crake. "Want the whole kit an' kaboodle of 'em down on us? Mr. de Croteau's a good man. He's a friend of your pap's. He won't tell on us."

As she finished something touched de Croteau's breast. He put up his hand and clutched a rifle-barrel. He slid his left hand swiftly along the barrel and was in time to prevent her pulling the trigger.

"Good Heavens, woman! You'd kill me?" he gasped.

"I'd bust a cap on the devil hisself this night if he stood atween me an' Hawkins County, Tennessee!" she hysterically sobbed.

"But I'm not stopping you from going where you will. What do you mean? Are you making for Tennessee?"

"An' you'll tell Bender all 'bout it!" she wailed.

"But hasn't Corn told you Bender made me a prisoner and intends to kill me?"

"Lawk! Do tell! Never heard him make a yip 'bout it," she cried. "I read the letter an' he was like a madman to come off the crick. He 'lowed he was glad that he'd lose his head an' git to killin' some of 'em. I'm skeered black an' blue that he's layin' to git a crack for that low-down Bender this very minute. He'll do for Bender, too, if he sees him. He right up an' said so when he sent me on ahead."

"He stayed behind to kill Bender?" de Croteau incredulously asked.

"Well, he 'lowed he'd do for him if it comes in handy. He held back to git our other hoss. Minute I read the letter he says we must light out. Leave everything, he says. An' we done it, but we come nigh forgittin' one of the hosses."

"What letter are you talking about?"

"Why, the one he fetched from Gainesville when him 'n' you moseyed over there. I swow if he didn't keep that letter hid till tonight, thinkin' if he opened it something dretful would happen. The post-office man told him it was from a lawyer, you know.

"An' what do you s'pose? That letter's friendly as any letter could be even if it did come from a lawyer. Seems my gran'pap's gone an' died an' left us his land on Little Moccasin Bend. Seems that last feller Corn done for went to work an' got well. Corn's mighty glum 'bout that. He says the feller has cheated us. We come out here an' lived all these years along of thinkin' him dead, an' all the time he's alive an' as spry as a flea on a dawg.

"Well, that letter was glory hallelujah for us. We're goin' home, an' Corn's already plannin' to guzzle down my property. But the Lawd's will will be done. I'll bust him with a ax-handle the first time he tries it."

A DOG bayed in the direction of the creek. Another caught it up. Then sounded shrill yelps. Mrs. Crake exclaimed:

"Corn's comin'! He's fetched along our b'ar-dawgs. I 'low they won't try any more kididoos when Corn Crake's round. They'd like to yap an' blat an' fetch all of Bender's skunks down on us. Bender'll be mortal mad when he l'arns he's lost my man. Corn was his best man in a rub. Here we be, Corn!"

"Git along! Git along!" panted the man's voice as he drove the dogs into the group.

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"Mr. de Croteau's here somewhere——"

"De Croteau! Oh, my ——!"

"Shut up!" fiercely commanded de Croteau. "I've been waiting for you to come along."

"Oh, my ——! Don't! I had to do it!"

"You have a horse there."

"I reckon I have," moaned Crake. "But I had to do it, Mr. de Croteau. I jest had to, or have my weazand slit. But all the time I was figgering on sneaking back and gitting you clear. So don't hold it ag'in' me——"

"Keep still! I want to buy the horse you're leading. Here's a handful of gold. I don't know how much, but it's all gold. You're in no danger. You brought your dogs along, and without them Bender can't trail you."

"Don't! Don't!" whispered Crake. "If Bender tries to foller me I'll go plumb crazy. Bender's dead."

"Dead!" whispered de Croteau.

Mrs. Crake began to snivel as if she had lost a friend.

"Buckshot Baker done for him," Crake wildly continued. "I seen it all. Some of the men built a fire on the bank of the crick and it was light as day almost. I sneaked up to see what was going on.

"Baker 'n' Bender walked away from the men right towards where I was hiding. They was talking 'bout some woman. Bender 'lowed he'd have her if he had to rip —— outer every one on the crick. I laid low to git a bead on him, as I reckoned he was talking 'bout 'Liza——"

Mrs. Crake gave a little shriek.

"Yes, sir, Mr. de Croteau," Crake went on. "You may think I'm meeching by natur', but that's all my game. I'm a wild Injun if I don't hold myself in. I had a bead on him when Baker stepped back and let him git ahead. And the next thing I knew there was ten feet of sword-blade a-sprouting out through Bender's chest, and him a-clawing at it and making sounds like he was a wildcat. He got both knives clear of his belt, but shucks! When he tried to throw one he didn't have 'nough strength to hurt a babby. Buckshot Baker stood there and jest laffed at him."

"The horse. I must have it. You don't need two. Strike south and get a boat and float down the White. It's all gold."

The musical clink brought Crake's hand groping across the horse's back. The gold was passed, and de Croteau found the bridle and turned the animal around.

"Goodby, Mr. de Croteau," said Crake. "I would 'a' gone back and sneaked you out if you hadn't cut and run. I always knew you wa'n't no common trash. If ever you happen along to Little Moccasin Bend in Hawkins County jest drop in and have a snack with us."

They passed on, Corn running ahead and driving the dogs, Mrs. Crake blundering after him with the three children perched on the horse. De Croteau led his purchase through the woods to the narrow clearing back of the Rodney cabin and hitched him to a tree. The cabin was dark.

From up the creek, about half-way along the path to the Gad place, a glow of light above the trees marked the outdoor rendezvous of the gang. It was hard for de Croteau to think of Bender as dead, as no longer being a menace. His self-respect still smarted from the treatment he had received from the outlaw leader. Now Bender was dead through treachery, if Crake had told the truth; and already another, fully as brutal and even more venomous, was assuming the leadership.

"He'll miss Hask and Whills," grimly thought de Croteau as he made for the cabin.

He softly called Rodney by name and received no response. As he stole to the small window and waited for some sign of life he was clutched by the fear that he had arrived too late, that Baker, fresh from murdering Bender, had raided the place and even now had the girl in his power. To his immense relief he heard a slight sound inside the cabin, and he repeated his call; and this time he added—

"It's de Croteau. Come out."

"Light that candle," directed Rodney's voice. "You, outside there, stand up to the window where we can get a look at you."

At last the candle was brought to the window, and de Croteau stood with his face in the light. He could see nothing but the slim hand of the girl holding the candle, but he heard Rodney's voice exclaim:

"Thank God, it's you! Baker's been here once since sundown. He acted drunk. Francine threatened him with the rifle and he laughed at her. When he went away he said he would be back before morning. We'd given up all hopes of your coming."

"Don't talk. There's not a second to lose. Come out. Don't stop for anything."

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THE girl ran from the cabin and joined him, seizing him by his arm. Her teeth clicked together with the horror of it as she whispered:

"If they overtake us—kill me. I might not succeed. But never let that man take me alive."

"I'll kill him if he gets within reach of a bullet," growled de Croteau. "Here comes your father. You two shake your nerves together. I have a horse at the edge of the woods. Baker has killed Bender. The only good piece of work to his credit."

The girl failed in striving to suppress a little cry of terror. Her father roundly rejoiced:

"Good news! The best of news! Now if some one will only kill Baker, honest men's chances will improve. I feel stronger for hearing it."

"Such a terrible creature!" whispered the girl as they made for the woods and her mind morbidly persisted in dwelling on Baker. "He isn't human. He said such fearful things. I had hard work to keep father from showing himself. He said you were a thief, and that Bender had you locked up and would kill you in the morning. Such a wicked beast of a liar."

"I was locked up in my cabin on Bender's orders. He did threaten to kill me. Here's the horse. Get up, Mr. Rodney. I hope you feel able to ride quite a bit."

"Anywhere, for any length of time. Only get the girl away from this cursed place."

"Then do you take hold of my hand, Miss Francine, and we'll lead the way. Bender's death will slow up pursuit. Crake has run away with his family and dogs. And there are no more dogs on the creek. We must reach Bender's cabin and get the horses there with the least possible delay."

"But won't Baker make for the cabin?" whispered the girl. "The Crakes were always telling stories about the treasure hidden there."

This gave de Croteau a new worry, and he wondered if he had yet reached the peak of his troubles. But he attempted to sooth her fears by assuring her:

"It'll take him all night to make the gang accept him as its leader. He can't count on Whills and Hask any more. Hold tight to my hand and lift your feet to avoid the roots."

Nor did she think to ask him to complete his remarks about Whills and Hask.

De Croteau was so elated by his success that he passed the point where he should have turned north and lost precious minutes in finding the path. This mishap sobered him and switched his mind around to a keen scrutiny of all that concerned their safety.

He explained his plan for giving the Gad cabin a wide berth and then cutting into the creek path where the traveling would be better. The girl was afraid of the path and would have willingly struck into the wilds and trusted to luck. Her father, however, appreciated the value of time, and agreed:

"The main path by all means. Whatever lead we gain we must gain on this end of the journey, and then try to hold it. They can't know we're making for the Knob and beyond, and if they do come up the path we shall hear them in time to hide."

Now that he was once more attentive to all possible dangers de Croteau was alarmed at the noise made by the horse. The way was narrow and thickly lined with bushes and sapling growth. In brushing against the projecting branches the animal continually betrayed their position. They were moving parallel to the creek and at a considerable distance from it, he supposed; and yet he feared that the agitation of the underbrush would be heard.

Suddenly he pressed the girl's hand as a signal for her to stop. Taking the horse by the nose, he waited to make sure that he had not been mistaken. Then the three of them saw it—a twinkle of a light through the trees. They watched it increase in strength until it illuminated the doorway of a cabin. De Croteau was nonplused as he believed he knew the region thoroughly along the creek, and no cabin should be there.

As he stared through the doorway his soul sickened. By some error he had turned into a diverging path and was a bit below and quite close to the Gad cabin.

A hoarse howl of bestial rage rang out from the cabin, and as Miss Francine tightened her grip on her escort's hand a short figure appeared in the doorway holding a lighted candle. Inarticulate cries gave place to the command:

"Up here, men! Devil's to pay with the big ace. De Croteau's escaped! Come and see what he left behind him!"

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DE CROTEAU had raised a gun when Baker first appeared, but he lowered it when the clumping of heavy feet sounded along the near-by path. Dark figures raced into the candlelight and entered the cabin. Oaths and yells told of their discovery. Baker occasionally appeared in view through the open door, dancing grotesquely in his fury and waving his naked sword. The absence of Bender satisfied the fugitives that Crake had told the truth.

De Croteau began working the horse back into the woods. The girl whispered for him to halt. A man was running up the creek path to the cabin, and as he came he yelled unintelligibly.

His repeated cries brought the gang out of the cabin. Baker's voice rose above the chorus of oaths and exclamations, commanding silence. Then the newcomer reported:

"They've lit out! Not a sign of th' gal, or her pap. I watched as ye told me to. Then I got s'picious an' sneaked to th' porch. Th' door was half-way open. I busted right in, but nary a one there."

The girl put her fingers to her ears to shut out Baker's horrible blasphemy. Because of this act she did not hear him inform his followers that the hole under the stone proved that de Croteau had hidden his stolen money there and that they all would be the richer by twenty-five thousand dollars for recapturing him.

De Croteau took advantage of the confusion to get the horse farther back into the woods; but before he got out of hearing he heard Baker screaming for some one to bring Crake and his dogs. Apparently none knew of Crake's flight, for several started off to get him. Baker called after them to bring the dogs to the Rodney place. Then with the rest of his men he made down the path to be on hand when the dogs arrived.

De Croteau halted, and after a minute of waiting the girl and her father grew frightened. Francine spoke for both when she asked him why they wasted time.

"I'm making sure they're all gone," he told her. "And we're not wasting time. We're saving it. We'll take the Knob path here and save a détour."

With that he turned the horse about and made for the creek.

Now that the traveling improved Francine decided there was no further need for de Croteau to hold her hand. She disengaged it, but stumbled, and only his quick action saved her from falling. After that she permitted him to guide her.

"Once we reach Bender's cabin we can make better time," encouraged de Croteau.

They came to the opening where he had faced the gang for the first time. In walking to one side to make sure that the girl had more than her share of the path his feet stumbled over a long mound, the resting-place of Leroy, the one-armed. Now the way, after leaving the opening, led up a slope, and the girl began breathing rapidly.

"You're winded," said de Croteau. "We'll stop and rest for a bit."

"On, on," insisted her father. "Let her ride. I'll walk."

He would have dismounted had not Rodney insisted:

"Keep on the horse. Time enough for you to try walking after we cross the Knob. A minute's rest won't hurt any of us. There is no sign of pursuit."

"Is that a camp-fire back there?" whispered the girl.

The men looked toward the south. A small area of reddish light was showing above the forest. As they watched, it grew in size and increased in brilliancy. De Croteau located its position by the course of the creek; and informed her:

"I think they're burning your cabin, Miss Francine. Perhaps an accident; perhaps a part of Baker's disappointment."

"In God's mercy let us be going!" urged Rodney.

"I feel more at ease at having seen the fire," said de Croteau. "It proves they've lost time at the cabin. They've been waiting there for the dogs. The men sent to Crake's have been hunting for him. Now they're just beginning the real work of hunting for us. If Bender had lived he would have had them scouring the woods long before this. But let's get along."

THE slope grew steeper, and against the dusky sky-line were scattered masses of ebony, marking occasional groves of oak. When they entered the grassy opening on the summit of the Knob the girl displayed alarm on beholding the black outlines of the various log structures. Rodney's horse whinnied in delight and attempted to turn to an open shed.

"Here's where the gang used to meet,"

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whispered de Croteau. "Don't be afraid. We have the place all to ourselves. The path leads down the other side and will take us to Bender's cabin. Mr. Rodney, it's all right for you to try walking a bit."

The girl demurred, and insisted that she was not tired; but the men overruled her, and de Croteau helped her to mount. In the south the red glow was dying. Down the north side of the Knob the three passed, the path dipping into the oaks. It was a new country to de Croteau, and it was Rodney who took the lead and explained:

"Oak ridges ahead and some rugged hills. The sound of running water is a danger signal as the banks are high—steep bluffs—and if we get too near we'll be over before we know it."

He walked with a nervous energy that left no room for his daughter to complain. Finally he halted, and after studying the faint horizon contour to the north announced that they were within less than two miles of Bender's cabin. The girl alarmed them by insisting—

"I hear something ahead."

The men gave ear, and after a moment Rodney impatiently said:

"Some animal near the trail. We must hurry along."

"Wait a moment," restrained de Croteau.

The regular *thud-thud* of a galloping horse soon rewarded his caution.

"Some one comes in a hurry," he whispered. "We must get off the trail."

They took up a position at one side of the path. Rodney stood at the horse's head; de Croteau cocked his rifle. With staccato bruskness came the rattle of hoofs over a stony stretch of the path, and a horse galloped by. The animal's labored breathing and the profane encouragement of the rider told of the man's eagerness to get back on the creek. The fugitives waited until the sound of the pounding hoofs grew faint. De Croteau lowered the hammer of his rifle and surmised:

"It must be the man sent by Bender to take Red Shot to the cabin. He's spoiling his horse to get back in time to enjoy the fun."

Rodney optimistically observed:

"He'll report that he saw nothing of us up this way. That will stop them from searching in this direction."

But de Croteau was less cheerful in his deductions.

"They don't know for a certainty that I'm with you. Baker may decide you two have fled with the Crakes. He will comb the woods for you.

"But he's sure to remember how Bender told me about my horse being up here. Baker knows I think a heap of that horse. He will figure on my going to Bender's cabin. He's sure to start men up this way before daylight to head me off. In the mean time some of his men will keep up the search for you folks along the bottoms. One thing is in our favor; he must split the gang in making the two searches."

The rest of the distance was covered with the girl traveling on foot and with her father riding.

"It's right here somewhere," announced Rodney, reining in his horse. "That cliff against the sky-line is my landmark. The cabin sets close to the trail but is well hidden by oaks."

CHAPTER XII

AS DECIDED AT THE KNOB

DE CROTEAU left the Rodneys in the path while he groped his way through the fringe of oaks. Red Shot answered the first low signal but did not come to meet his master. De Croteau proceeded to the rear of the cabin, where the joyous whinnying of his pet soon led him to a small corral. The bars were soon found, and almost before the last one was thrown to the ground the horse was upon him, squealing shrilly and pretending to bite.

De Croteau had no time for play as he could hear other animals moving about inside the rough fence. The cliff in the immediate background and the surrounding trees made the night very dark, and to prevent the horses from bolting through the opening Rodney was called to lend a hand. De Croteau leaped on Red Shot's back and rode into the corral and soon had one horse by the mane while the other trotted ahead to be captured at the bars.

They returned to the path and found Miss Francine extremely nervous, although only the wind through the forest crown could be heard. It was decided to abandon the Crake horse as being too heavy and slow for the rough travel ahead. Miss Francine lamented over what she deemed to be a waste of time when de Croteau announced his

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intention of entering the cabin in search of food, blankets and saddles. Already the girl was hearing her pursuers in the night wind, in the dead leaves under the trees, far back toward Devil Knob, and creeping close by her side.

De Croteau ran to the cabin and fumbled at the door until his fingers found the latch-string. Evidently Bender had small fear of trespassers, thought de Croteau. Then an exclamation from Miss Francine caused him to turn to one side as in the act of kicking the door open.

There came a deafening explosion, and for an instant the doorway was filled with a lurid glare, followed by the acrid reek of gunpowder. A loud cry from the path told how the detonation had registered on the Rodneys. As soon as he could find his voice de Croteau called out:

"All right. Spring-gun here to scare off intruders. I'll be right back."

He entered and gingerly followed along the wall to avoid other traps until he gained the rear end of the room. His outstretched hands soon located a table and a candle stuck in the neck of a bottle. He made a light and observed that the spring-gun consisted of a double-barrel shotgun mounted on a stout frame. Rawhide ropes, passing through holes in the lintel log and secured to the top of the door on the outside, had pulled both triggers of the cocked gun when the door was swung inward. There were no marks on the door, and had he not stepped aside he would have been riddled.

Beside the fireplace a section of two logs supported cleats, ostensibly to accommodate some pots and pans. But a closer examination revealed that the logs were sawed through, permitting them to be moved as one, and thus affording a rear entrance.

On the other side of the fireplace the corner was curtained off with strips of calico. De Croteau investigated this and was astonished to behold a woman's gown of some soft material suspended from a peg. It was entirely unlike the clothing worn by the women along Wolf Creek, and must have represented some of the spoils obtained by Bender on one of his raids.

On the floor was a pair of women's shoes, new, like the gown. De Croteau wondered how long the dead outlaw leader had possessed these, and if he intended them as a gift to his woman.

But the wall which de Croteau had followed after entering the room contained no suggestion of femininity. It was decorated with a long row of knives, mostly of the bowie pattern. They hung from pegs, and beside each was a fringed sheath. It was possible to picture the dead outlaw spending his lonely hours in polishing his dreadful weapons and in staring at the curtained corner.

It had required less than a minute to satisfy his curiosity, but already Rodney was sounding a low whistle to quicken his return. Several saddles near the door next received de Croteau's attention. He found his own property there, and one with dark stains which had belonged to Leroy, and a heavy McClellan. New blankets, which had never been unrolled apparently, were obtained from a shelf. Strips of bear-bacon and some dried venison were procured from over the fireplace.

He called for Rodney to help him; and the two soon had the saddles buckled on and the blankets strapped on behind.

"YOU'RE to ride Red Shot, Miss Francine. I know he's all right," said de Croteau. "I'll ride the pack-animal, and that leaves your father the McKinney roan."

He helped the girl up and heard the McClellan army saddle creak as Rodney mounted. Then he said:

"I'd like to try for some of Bender's buried treasure. It'll take only a moment to look around."

"You forget that the gunshot may have been heard," protested Rodney. "We have horses and food. Let well enough alone."

"At least I must put out the candle."

He raced to the cabin and extinguished the telltale point of light, and then was as eager to be off as were his friends. The discharge of the two barrels must have carried a long distance through the silent night.

The moment he put his foot in the stirrup and attempted to throw his leg over the saddle he was convinced that Leroy had spoken truthfully in saying that the beast did not fancy a rider. The animal jumped and plunged, springing from side to side of the path, and it was a minute before de Croteau, excellent horseman though he was, could find his seat and bring the horse under control. Even then he dared not ride close to his companions, but directed:

"Go ahead. I'll soon take it out of him."

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Having neither whip nor spurs this was not an easy achievement, and more than once the brute bolted into the undergrowth to the detriment of de Croteau's skin and clothes.

Beyond the cabin the path became more arduous to follow, although they would not reach the most mountainous section until they struck the northern border of Douglas County, some thirty miles distant. Their progress was slow, especially when coming to streams, as every watercourse was between precipitous banks or bluffs. Rodney was confident that he could profit by his former visit to the hills and follow the path for at least five miles; but he soon grew confused, and de Croteau sent his partially subdued mount to the front to pick out the way. After an hour's travel at nothing better than a walk the heavens grew gray before the approach of morning. Quickening their pace, they crossed the head of Lower Spring Creek and covered a gently rolling piece of country at a brisk gallop. The three horses were keen for travel, and Red Shot crowded jealously against his master's mount whenever the girl relaxed the pull on the bit.

The rolling country gave way to low oak ridges. In crossing these they kept to the east of the North Fork. Sunrise found them a score of miles from Wolf Creek and about east of Rockbridge.

De Croteau ordered a halt while he briefly explained their position. Acting on his advice, they forded the stream and entered an extensive growth of pine. The girl was nearly exhausted because of travel and the lack of sleep, and the two men decided to allow her a chance to rest. On the western edge of the pines, and where the oaks resumed their sway, they dismounted, and de Croteau began collecting dry fuel which would give off no smoke. On learning that they were but ten miles from Bender's cabin Miss Francine wanted to move on, and declared that she could eat nothing that had been in the outlaw's cabin.

"Then sleep if you can't eat," commanded her father. "I must rest."

This brought her to acquiescence; and, arranging the blankets, she soon slept. Rodney walked into the oaks to look for small game. He refrained from using his revolvers, but had no trouble in bagging four squirrels by throwing sticks. Dressing his game, he returned to camp, where the girl was still sleeping soundly. A bed of coals was quickly utilized in broiling the squirrels. Rodney had filled a frying-pan with bacon and was snoring with his back against a tree.

De Croteau cooked the squirrels and bacon and reluctantly awakened his companions. As he had forgotten to procure salt at the cabin they were forced to eat their breakfast without seasoning. The girl ate some of the bacon, but would not touch the game.

"I'd planned to avoid Rockbridge and cross the border without any delay," said de Croteau. "But I can ride in there and get some salt."

"You must have feared danger if you planned to avoid the place," remarked Rodney.

"Small traders from outlying points like Rockbridge visit Springfield. I worked for a merchant who had dealings with many of them. I might be recognized. I'm a fugitive, you know."

"Then the danger still exists, and we'll worry along without the salt," said Rodney. "And how far do you plan to accompany us, Mr. de Croteau?"

"Unless I change my mind I shall go the whole distance and face it out."

"I don't believe the homicide charge will bother you any."

"Why, of course it won't," spoke up Francine. "It was self-defense."

But she had covered her ears, while her father had not, when Baker at the Gad cabin loudly reminded his men that de Croteau had stolen twenty-five thousand dollars. De Croteau glanced at Rodney and was disturbed by the gravity of the latter's expression.

"Let's be moving," urged Rodney, rising and rolling up the blankets.

They rode east through the oaklands until they came to a spring, which, de Croteau announced, marked the end of their approach toward Rockbridge. They dismounted and drank of the cool water. De Croteau scouted about on foot and soon returned, and informed them:

"I've found the path the man Scannon was telling me about. We're on the edge of Douglas County, and if the animals can hold out for twenty miles on a stretch we'll be in the heart of the hills and safe from the gang. But the distance must be covered by night, when we must camp."

The girl was first in the saddle and rode on ahead. Rodney declared—

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"I'll stand by you, of course."

"You heard what Baker said last night?"

"I couldn't help it. But I'll stand by you."

"You won't be asked to help a thief," was the short reply. "As soon as I reach Springfield I'll prove that Baker lied."

"You don't have to prove anything to me. Of course he lied. But were you a thief a thousand times over I'd still be in your debt."

"Enough talk. I'm not a thief," growled de Croteau as he galloped on to overtake Red Shot.

THEIR course now led through an oak opening, which was bounded on each side by a heavy pine growth. De Croteau and the girl kept well in the lead, racing stirrup to stirrup up a gentle slope. When they pulled in and were waiting for the roan to come up she sharply cried out—

"Our blaze must have fired the woods!"

De Croteau jerked up his head and looked back toward the south.

"It's too far away to come from our fire; much too far," he muttered. "And it isn't a woods fire. There are three distinct columns of smoke. No hunter ever made it. It's a signal."

Rodney joined them, and on being informed of the strange smoke stared uneasily over the back country and asked—

"Well, if it's a signal, what does it mean?"

"One of Baker's scouts has struck our trail and is telling the gang to hurry along."

"Found our horses' tracks?" inquired the girl.

"Possibly. More likely he visited Bender's cabin and discovered these three horses were gone. And very likely he found Crake's horse straying along the path.

"But there's nothing to worry about. We have a good lead. If we can hold out for the next twenty miles till we reach the northern edge of Douglas County we can laugh at them."

"See, the smoke is dying out!" joyfully announced Francine.

De Croteau resumed his study of the southern heavens. The haze of Indian Summer was still streaked with fat smudges of smoke, but the three perpendicular columns had vanished. De Croteau believed that the truth was best, so he told them:

"That means the signal has been received and answered. The scout has killed his fires. Never mind. We still have all the advantage."

But while the leaden pall of smoke might thin away, the shadow it cast over their spirits grew heavier and blacker. The effect of its threatening message was shown when they resumed their flight. Red Shot and the pedler's pack-horse stood the sharp pace well, but Rodney's big roan began to lag.

For the first time since their start from the Gad cabin de Croteau was seriously worried. He repeatedly glanced back in search of a fresh smoke and as often observed that the roan was in a bad way. He reined in and called out for the girl to do the same.

The roan came up, running heavily, and Rodney angrily told them to ride on and leave him to follow. De Croteau insisted that they ride together. So their progress was now marked by the strength of the roan, and de Croteau was continually turning his head to look back.

Now he noticed that gray clouds were taking the place of the yellowish haze along the southeastern horizon, and rapidly crawling after them. He said nothing of this new menace until a big raindrop splashed on his upturned face.

"Force him along, Mr. Rodney," he sharply sang out. "Rain's coming, and if we make any time it must be within the next few miles."

The roan responded to fresh urging and covered the ground in a final burst of speed for some two miles. Then the scattered drops increased to a steady downpour. The way became soft and slippery where it did not lead over rocks. The three horses were forced to walk much of the time, and the roan was on his last legs. They were leaving a trail their pursuers could follow on the run.

Rodney dismounted and led his animal. De Croteau swung from the path into the oaks, and the others followed him. The roan developed a limp and did not improve even after Rodney had covered two miles on foot.

De Croteau was desperate. He jumped from the saddle and declared:

"This will never do! We're holding ourselves back because of that nag. Get up and ride and I'll foot it."

"I won't take your horse," wearily refused Rodney.

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"Then the game's up for all of us," was the grim reply. "We'll turn the roan loose. I can run. Up with you, and push ahead as fast as you can. In this going I can keep up. We haven't covered more than ten miles since crossing the line, and we must turn off ten more before we dare camp. Back into the road, Miss Francine, and let Red Shot have his head!"

At first she refused to leave him behind; but he impatiently assured her that he could make excellent time for several miles, and if the rain continued outtravel the horses. As he talked he removed the bridle, stripped off the heavy saddle and turned the roan free. Rodney's strength was failing; and although he protested he was induced to climb into the saddle. The pack-horse's perverse spirit had been conquered by the hardships of the road, and he showed no fight to his new rider.

Trailing his rifle, de Croteau gained the path and soon passed the girl. He trotted along steadily and had no trouble in maintaining the lead. When he tired he swung to one side and motioned for them to set the pace. While he struggled through the mud and scrambled up slippery slopes he was pleased to realize that his foes were encountering like difficulties. At the end of five miles he was fresher than either of the horses.

The animals were allowed a breathing spell, and the fugitives made the welcome discovery that the rain had ceased. Even while they rested the sky began to lighten. There was great comfort in this promise of clearing weather, so responsive is life to sunshine. Miss Francine lifted her drooping head, and her father squared his shoulders.

De Croteau laid aside his rifle, climbed an oak and from the topmost branches endeavored to study the back track. As he looked the sun broke through the clouds and made every rain drop a shimmering jewel. The path was discernible only in spots, and de Croteau fastened his gaze on a brown ribbon thrown over the crest of the rearmost ridge. As the mists vanished under the sunlight this bit of the road stood out distinct against the sky-line.

De Croteau rubbed his eyes to make sure it was no delusion as he discovered a moving object. He tried to make himself believe it was the roan, limping after them; then another tiny object came over the ridge, and another and another. He crashed to the ground and commanded:

"Ride for it! They've just topped a ridge 'way back."

THE announcement galvanized the Rodneys into tremulous activity. They were in the saddle and ready to ride by the time de Croteau had secured his rifle. The latter believed it would come to a fight before sunset, for the outlaws must have traveled two miles to the fugitives' one. The country was growing more rugged, the banks of streams more lofty and steep, and the numerous deep ravines compelled a close adherence to the well-worn path.

Had they had time they could have selected some cave where only chance would permit the gang to discover them. But with the chase being pressed so hotly, and their trail being so easily read, any concealment except under cover of night was out of the question. Baker's men knew the road and could gallop where their quarry must proceed cautiously.

Something whined over de Croteau's head and he heard the dull report of a rifle. He faced about and glimpsed a horseman flying recklessly down the last slope, endeavoring to get under cover of the forest before his lead could be returned.

De Croteau threw up his Spencer, fired three shots and had the satisfaction of seeing the horse bolt from the path. The shots alarmed the Rodneys and caused them to halt. Rodney swung about, revolver in hand, ready to take part in the fight as de Croteau ran toward them and waved a hand for them to ride on.

The path turned and twisted, now dipping into a hollow, now climbing a steep slope, but the general trend was upward to the height of land, and ahead rose the bald dome of a high knob which marked the source of the Gasconade and those streams which flow north into the Osage. The Hartsville road passed the foot of this knob; and de Croteau visualized it as standing at the threshold of liberty.

He glimpsed a horseman far back and emptied his rifle and shoved a fresh magazine of cartridges through the tube in the butt as he ran. In a final spurt, incited by the shots, the two horses rounded a curve, and their riders beheld the neck of the bottle. On the left hand the road passed into the shadow of the knob; on the right a cliff

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of broken rock encroached until there was scarcely room for three horsemen to ride abreast.

De Croteau came and paused to stare at the rocky walls. His fighting instinct told him that this was the place to give battle. If the outlaws attempted to flank him by climbing either height they must abandon their horses.

The Rodneys passed through the natural gateway and immediately disappeared as the road swung abruptly toward the northwest. As de Croteau failed to follow them they soon returned.

"Ride on! Ride on! I'll turn them back. Strike for Hartsville. I'll follow you," he cried.

"We can't leave you—" began Rodney.

"Good Heavens! Will you talk away your lives? Get going! They can never catch me. I'll duck into the woods if need be. Be off!"

They had the good sense to do as they were told, realizing that they could help none by staying. As they disappeared down the path de Croteau kneeled behind a rock at the foot of the knob and waited for the enemy to appear. They were so tardy in showing themselves that he began to fear that they had found a path around his position and had cut in between him and his friends.

Then a horse wearily galloped around the bend, his rider flogging him unmercifully. Drawing a perfect bead, de Croteau fired the heavy fifty-four Spencer and knocked the man from the saddle. The nose of a second horse showed at the bend, but the animal was drawn back before de Croteau could discharge a second bullet.

The mount of the dead man walked slowly toward the ambush, swinging his head from side to side in search of grass. Then he decided that excellent grazing would be found beyond the narrow pass and quickened his pace to a trot. De Croteau watched him hungrily, purposing to use him in continuing his flight should the defense of the pass prove to be impossible. Those beyond the bend foresaw this also, and a man ducked into view long enough to fire two shots from a revolver. Neither bullet hit the animal, and a shot from the Spencer sent the fellow to cover. Unharmed, the horse passed de Croteau and made for a ribbon of grass which was sheltered from the fire of the gang by a projecting shoulder of the opposite cliff.

De Croteau became impatient as no further efforts were made to force his position. With his rifle and two revolvers he believed he could stop a rush, and he was eager to have it over with. The suspense of waiting was more trying to his nerves than action would be. He began to imagine that they had circled around his hiding-place and were about to attack him from behind. He knew this was a foolish thought, as the knob and the opposite cliff presented impassable barriers for horsemen. Yet he was unable to restrain himself from glancing over his shoulder.

Thirty minutes passed—it seemed to him to be several hours—and he was startled by a handful of dirt rattling down the steep slope of the knob.

He stared upward to locate the source of the tiny avalanche, and at a distance of three hundred feet detected motion. It came and went, but always in the same place. One of the men evidently had climbed the knob and was trying to locate him.

He had taken position behind a rock and was thrusting his head over the top of his shelter and as quickly was drawing it back. Because of this timidity and the deep shadows cast by the declining sun de Croteau remained undiscovered for some minutes. He cautiously shifted to a more comfortable position for watching the slope, and gradually brought his rifle up to cover the rock.

Again the man's head bobbed into view, a very small target at the distance, and de Croteau waited. Discouraged by his lack of success, and at the same time made careless, or reckless, the man rose until his head and shoulders were exposed to view. This time he did not dodge back but suddenly threw his rifle to his shoulder. Before he could fire the Spencer boomed and the limp body fell across the top of the rock in spread-eagle fashion, and the rifle clattered down over the rocks for some fifty feet.

A SCREAM of rage beyond the turn testified that others had witnessed the tragedy. De Croteau's spirits rose high. He believed that he could whip them. In shifting about to watch the path he was careless, and his hat jumped off his head in salutation to the bark of a navy forty-four.

"I'm going to get you, de Croteau," called Baker's voice. "My men already are running down the girl and the old man. They can't escape."

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"Two of your men won't do any more running," boasted de Croteau; but his former dread of Baker returned and dampened his ardor. There was something so inexorable in the fellow's make-up.

The game of waiting was resumed. De Croteau knew that they were busy, that their leader's keen wits were directing some new coup. As he felt his nerves giving way, he worked himself into a terrible rage. He had to bite his lips to refrain from cursing them for cowards and from challenging them to make it an open fight in the road.

He fought down this incipient madness and endeavored to put himself in Baker's place so that he might guess what the new trick would consist of. He twisted his head and stared up to the sun-bathed top of the opposite cliff. Having failed on the knob, Baker would try to kill from the cliff. Whatever his plan was it must be based on the fact that his victim was hiding at the base of the knob.

Once he came to this decision, de Croteau determined to spoil the enemy's move by shifting his position. A scant ten feet separated him from a boulder on the opposite side of the narrow road. Bending low and gathering his heels under him, he held his breath and made a flying leap across the road. He struck on his knees behind the rock and heard a volley of shots whistle through the pass, two seconds too late.

Baker began shouting loudly, some order to one of his men. De Croteau deduced that he was trying to warn the fellow that the quarry had changed cover. To foil him in this design de Croteau sought to blur the message by adding his own stentorian shouts and as he cried out a pebble struck between him and the wall of the cliff.

Actuated by instinct and without pausing to reason, he squirmed inward and against the cliff just in time to escape being smashed by a boulder dropped from above. It struck the spot where he had been hiding, and the flying particles of rock cut his face. A fusillade of shots down the path admonished him to keep his head low.

He essayed to catch a glimpse of the man on the cliff, but the rock rose too sheer. Working with his knife, he made a peephole at the base of two boulders so he might not be taken by suprize by a rush from the bend. More rocks were tumbled down, but none was so nicely aimed as the first.

There was no sign of life at the bend, but the horse behind him startled him by snorting loudly. He could not see the animal because of the projecting rock, but he heard rocks crashing and knew that the unseen had changed his tactics and was trying to kill or maim the animal. As the bombardment continued de Croteau concluded that the animal was shrewd enough to hug close to the cliff.

It would be possible, he believed, to crawl back and around the outstanding rib of rock, secure the animal and make a dash for it, up the road. He discarded this plan, however, as it would place him within range of the outlaw up the cliff and would bring the others galloping after him. And he doubted if luck would afford him another such strategic position for holding up the chase.

He critically measured the remaining daylight. Not for half an hour would they dare charge down upon him. That gave the Rodneys about two hours' start. As he thought of the horse, almost within reach, another bold plan seeped into his mind and took definite form.

At first he weighed it idly and was inclined to dismiss it. Then he began to wonder if the very element of audacity might not give him a better chance than he could enjoy when the light failed and the outlaws closed in. The danger from the outlaw on the cliff would be less than that incurred by flight.

There remained, to be sure, the great risk of stopping a bullet from the bushes at the bend. On the other hand, they would be taken off their guard and might be wild in their shooting.

Two men already were dead. He did not believe that Baker had more than one companion at the bend. From the top of the oak he had sighted four horsemen, and Baker surely had sent some of his men to search the woods east of the creek. Also, there were certain members of the gang who must bitterly resent Bender's death, even if they did not dare to avenge it. All such must have quietly withdrawn from Baker's leadership and could not be participating in the chase.

He carefully examined his revolvers, for he would rely upon them exclusively; and, abandoning his rifle, he began working his way back to where the horse was finding shelter. The animal shied when he beheld de Croteau's heels rounding the rock, but a violent volley of stones from the cliff restrained him from bolting.

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With a final effort de Croteau drew his head and shoulders into the little alcove. So far as he could judge his maneuver was unsuspected by the man on the cliff, or by those at the bend.

The horse snorted and displayed much uneasiness at first, but de Croteau ever had a way with him in securing the confidence of horses. After a few moments of petting the animal quieted down. When de Croteau crawled to his feet the horse crowded against him as if seeking protection.

Without allowing himself further time for misgivings de Croteau swung into the saddle and drew his two guns. For a moment there obtruded the temptation to race after the Rodneys and risk a running fight. It was only a flicker of weakness, however. The pursuit must be effectually stopped, rather than slowed up.

Lying low with his head on the horse's neck, de Croteau spoke sharply, then dug in his heels and sent his mount around the scattered boulders, into the road and straight toward the bend. The thickening shadows and the rider's recumbent position misled the watchful eyes. It was believed that the horse had been frightened from the shelter of the cliff and was taking the back track for home.

It was not until the horse reached the body of his dead master and attempted to shy to one side that the trick was suspected. As the animal tried to bolt de Croteau instinctively shifted his position to maintain his balance, and the movement betrayed him. A startled yell rang out from the bushes and was followed by a wild shot.

THEN came the sound of a man crashing through the growth and Baker's voice beyond the bend fiercely demanding to know the cause of the alarm. But by this time de Croteau was turning the curve, the reins in his teeth, his two hands gripping the thirty-sixes. Even then Baker did not seem to sense the situation, for he remained by the side of the path, his head thrust forward, his hands at his side.

"Look out! He's comin'!" bawled the man in the bushes.

The rifle discharged for the second time, and the galloping animal came to a plunging halt and reared high. Then Baker realized his danger and commenced firing. De Croteau heard two bullets thud into the body of his dying mount even as he was slipping to the ground to escape from being crushed.

Baker attempted to jump to cover as de Croteau leaped clear of the horse, but went down with a shattered leg, the result of de Croteau's first bullet. But like a venomous snake insecurely pinned down he could still strike, and his next shot caught de Croteau in the thigh and sent him staggering to one side.

"We'll go together!" yelled Baker.

De Croteau was now firing steadily with both guns and fairly riddling his man. The rifleman in the woods discharged a string of shots, all of which went wild and indicated that he was shooting at random. The man on the cliff was not in range as the bend hid the combatants from view. De Croteau crumpled up at the edge of the woods, but forced himself to reload his guns.

"How goes it?" bawled the rifleman anxiously.

"Baker's just gone to ——, and I'm coming for you," de Croteau answered.

With a yelp of fright the man plunged deeper into the growth. De Croteau slit open his trousers leg and examined his wound. The bullet had missed the bone and the big artery. He improvised a bandage from his handkerchief, staggered to his feet and hopped along to where Baker lay. The last bullet had caught the Ku Klux leader between the eyes.

His horse was tethered to an oak close by; and releasing the animal, de Croteau dragged himself into the saddle. He rounded the bend at a walk and scrutinized the top of the cliff, but saw nothing of the outlaw. He passed up the path and without pausing to recover his rifle galloped through the defile and after the Rodneys.

"I'll wager Bender will laugh to see him," he said aloud; and then was surprized to find himself laughing hysterically.

CHAPTER XIII

A MAN RIDES SOUTH

DE CROTEAU overtook his friends five miles from the scene of the outlaws' defeat. The two were afoot and making slow progress, their horses being in a sad state.

Rodney came within one of firing on his young friend in the darkness. When informed that there was no more danger from

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the wolf-pack father and daughter nearly collapsed. The girl remained with the horses beside the road while de Croteau found some pine stumps and requested Rodney to break them up.

Not until a fire was started back from the road did Rodney discover his friend's plight. He dressed the wound, and after the blankets were dried insisted that de Croteau lie down. On learning that her protector had been wounded the girl was deeply affected, but said little. For the first time since they crossed the Missouri border in their flight from Arkansas the Rodneys were free from worry. They slept soundly that night.

In the morning, although his leg pained him much, de Croteau believed that his hurt was healing. Now that Baker was eliminated and his followers dispersed the three agreed to abandon the original plan of leaving the road at the head of Clarke's Creek, and instead they made for Hartsville so as to follow down the Woods Fork.

It was at the edge of the town that Francine for the first time saw a poster denouncing de Croteau as a thief. Rodney hastened to assure her it was all a mistake, but de Croteau made no denial.

Pausing only long enough for Rodney to buy some cooked food and some salve for the wounded leg, they took to the Woods Fork and followed it so long as its general course led them west toward Springfield. On the north side of the stream were pleasant oak openings, and on the south extended post-oak ridges. They traveled leisurely, to spare the horses and to convenience de Croteau.

Posted beside the creek trail was another sheriff's notice, and after passing it de Croteau showed a disposition to avoid the girl's company by riding ahead. The oak openings gave way for a stretch of prairie land, which was pleasing to the eye.

Their horses rapidly recuperated, and as Baker's mount proved to be tractable de Croteau exchanged with the girl. They covered the sixty-odd miles in three days, arriving at Springfield in early evening. On the outskirts of the town de Croteau reined in Red Shot and announced:

"I have some business to attend to. You'll find a comfortable hotel on the main street. By and by I'll look you up."

"You'll lose no time in seeing a doctor?" queried the girl anxiously.

"I'll get fixed up prime. The leg's getting along well without a sawbones."

Rodney insisted on accompanying him, but de Croteau refused the offer, saying:

"It's a one-man game. I'll worry along all right. Later, I may ask you to do me a service. Good-by."

His leave-taking was abrupt. Then, as on another occasion, he took to the less frequented streets and rode to a small house set back from the road. Limping up the path, he peeped through a window and made sure that his man was at home. Then he mounted the small porch and rapped on the door.

Bushrod Williams opened the door and for half a minute stared in amazement at his visitor. He was in his shirt sleeves and unarmed.

"You don't need 'em, Bushrod," de Croteau assured him, as the sheriff's gaze darted to his belt hanging from a hook. Take mine. They're all right."

And, unbuckling his belt, he presented it to Williams.

Williams tossed the belt into a chair and quietly replied:

"I don't think I need 'em, either. Come in. That short, curly beard fooled me for a bit, Jeff. You walk a little lame. Gone hard with you, I take it. I've been waiting and waiting for you to get over your foolishness and give yourself up."

"I'd never come back to go to jail for killing Roman," said de Croteau as he closed the door and dropped into a chair. "But when I found you were calling me a thief I had to have a show down."

"You mean you just found that out?" exclaimed the sheriff; and he motioned for his wife to leave the room.

"Only a short time ago. Even then I didn't believe it was your work," was the reproachful reply. "It happened in this fashion."

And with the sheriff listening with all his ears de Croteau told of his life on Wolf Creek, of the Rodneys, of the rivalry between Bender and Baker and of their deaths.

"Doggone! You had all the luck," grieved the sheriff. "And I was just about to lead a posse down there and snag Knife Bender. If Greene County offered a reward for your hide it can't blot out the debt Missouri owes to you. Do you mean to tell me you don't know about Roman?"

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DE CROTEAU shook his head. The sheriff's stern face broke into a grim smile.

"Roman wasn't killed," he startled his hearer by saying. "He's up on the river, back at his old tricks."

"Alive?" cried de Croteau. "And I've been through —— for nothing!"

"Not if Roman was the only cause for your running away," was the grave reply. "It must be worth something to have done a good turn for your new friends."

"It was because the notice didn't mention Roman's death that made me believe it was a trick played by Baker.

Then angrily: "Now, Williams, what about that twenty-five thousand dollars? You know I never stole a dollar in all my life. I've made all sorts of a fool of myself, but never that."

Williams stared at him steadily for a full minute, then muttered—

"Doggone it if I don't begin to believe you're talking straight."

Then his face clouded, and he argued: "But Lascar says the money's gone, that you must 'a' taken it. He's a square man. He liked you. Why, it's even believed you was sweet on his girl. And there you were running away after shooting a man in self-defense—not a man, a skunk. And at the same time twenty-five thousand dollars is found to be missing. It didn't go away without being carried."

"Lascar's a liar. I'll make him eat his words," wrathfully retorted de Croteau.

"You simmer down!" sharply commanded Williams. "I'm overlooking the lead you heaved by my ears down-country. That was part of the game. But no threats from you. Lascar is honest. If it had been a smaller amount he'd have pocketed his loss and never made a yip. But it well nigh crippled him.

"He's had enough trouble over it without having you shooting him up. Reckon you don't know how your pap sent him a challenge to fight a duel, and when he refused wrote him a letter, saying he was coming down here to slice off his ears? Well, he did. And your pap is under ten thousand dollar bond to keep the peace and keep away from Springfield for a while."

"That's like Dad," murmured de Croteau, his eyes softening. "No one could ever make him believe I was a thief. My mother?"

"Reckon it's been her more'n the bonds that's kept your pap at home. It's been a bad mess. Mighty bad for Lascar."

"Then the sooner we clean it up the better. Put on your coat and come along."

"Where? To do what?" suspiciously asked the sheriff, not relishing the expression on the young man's face. "You're my prisoner, you know. I want to be fair to you and your folks. I'll keep you here instead of at the jail, for I reckon you won't do any more running away. But before we stir I want to know what's up."

"I'll never run away again. There's one man who can throw some light on the case —Simon Santey. The last thing I did before leaving town that night was to call on him and hand over some money I had collected for Lascar the day of the race. A little over two thousand dollars. If I was going to steal why didn't I keep that? I risked capture to give it to him. In accusing me of stealing twenty-five thousand did Lascar mention my returning two thousand?"

Williams shook his head slowly and rubbed his chin in deep perplexity.

"Well, we'll call on Santey," he agreed.

He slipped into his coat, buckled on his belt and led Red Shot into his stable and removed the saddle. Then the two set out on foot, taking advantage of the side streets and darkness.

De Croteau kept back while Williams asked the landlady to be shown to her lodger's room.

"He has the two rooms front, one flight up," she informed him. "He used to have the back room, but now he has Mr. de Croteau's——"

Then she caught a glimpse of de Croteau's face and threw her apron over her head and tottered back to the kitchen.

"My old rooms," mumbled de Croteau as he took the lead and limped up the stairs.

He knocked on the door, and, receiving no reply, turned the knob. The door was unlocked, and they entered. The sheriff lighted the lamp on the table and said—

"Suppose you want to wait for him?"

De Croteau nodded, but remained standing and gazed about on his possessions. Santey was enjoying all his belongings so far as he could observe. It was bitter to contemplate his landlady's belief that he would never return. It seemed a long time since he last beheld his books and pictures

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and the various bachelor comforts of pipes and liquor stand. One of his favorite authors was open on the table where Santey had left it.

"Well, if the game is to wait for him why don't you sit down?" asked the sheriff, who had made himself comfortable in an easy chair.

"Don't mind me," said de Croteau. "All these furnishings are mine. I have a right to look about a bit. Santey seems to have stepped into my shoes."

He passed around the room, pausing to renew acquaintance with picture or book. He came to the deep closet which ran back to the eaves and was curious to learn if Santey was also making use of his rather elaborate wardrobe. He threw back the door.

His clothing had been shifted to the rear hooks. Under the eaves were his carpet-bags and trunk. On the front hooks hung Santey's sedate garments, and a glance told him Santey, while not changing the cut and sober pattern of his apparel, had increased it considerably. It was also plain that the fellow had taken up riding, as was shown by a pair of polished riding boots.

Santey's fortunes must have improved since they talked together at the open window of the back room that rainy night. Then returned the problem of the money he had left for Santey to turn over to Lascar. He scowled heavily at the riding-boots as he tried to reconcile Lascar's belief he was a thief with that last act of paying in two thousand dollars.

"He never paid it in!" he exclaimed aloud, his half-formed suspicions suddenly crystallizing into conviction. "Santey never paid the money in, Williams. It's the only way to explain the muddle. My father forgave the old feud and placed Santey with Lascar. Santey was a thief at heart, or else he planned to carry on the feud, but didn't have sand enough to use lead."

WILLIAMS said nothing but watched him earnestly. As for de Croteau he plunged into the closet and began throwing wearing-apparel into the floor of the sitting-room. The riding-boots were peculiarly offensive, perhaps because they recalled his own riding days with Jessie Lascar. These he hurled viciously across the room, causing the sheriff to duck his head.

"Be careful what you're doing! Want to knock the lamp over and set the place on fire? Big cat-fish!"

"Bring that lamp so I can get at my trunk," ordered de Croteau from the closet.

"Wait a minute! Hold your horses! Come out here, young fire-eater," grunted the sheriff.

The tone, rather than the words, brought de Croteau's disheveled head to the doorway.

Williams was on his knees before the boots.

"Hand down that lamp," he commanded, seeming loath to leave the foot-gear.

De Croteau passed him the lamp and then discovered what was holding his companion's attention. Obtruding from the top of one of the boots was a roll of bank-notes. They had been dislodged from their hiding-place by de Croteau's rude treatment.

"I want you to see me pull 'em out," muttered the sheriff.

He gingerly extracted the roll and thrust his hand into the boot.

"Foot of it seems to be packed solid clear to the toe!" he softly exclaimed. "No law against a man keeping his earnings in a boot, but let's have a look."

And he pulled forth more money.

"It may be his and honestly come by," he continued. "That's all in that boot. Now let's see t'other."

The second boot was empty.

"What we're doing ain't just according to rule. I haven't any search-warrant—" began Williams.

"You've got quite a heap of money. Count it!" snapped de Croteau.

Williams took the money to the table and rapidly thumbed it over.

"It lacks a hundred and eighteen dollars of being an even two thousand. He either fetched it from St. Louis or——"

"Stole it!" growled de Croteau. "Santey isn't a man to bank honest money in a boot."

"Well, we ain't proved he stole it," mused the sheriff. "It would make it homely for me if he come back now and found us doing this. But in for a dollar, in for a dozen!"

He left the money on the table and carried the lamp into the closet. The pitch of the roof forced him to bow his head as he gained the end. Placing the lamp on the trunk, he opened the carpet-bags, then called on de

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Croteau to hold the lamp while he examined the trunk.

"We got a right to look over your property," he mumbled as he lifted out the contents, piece by piece. "Nothing in any of them."

De Croteau would have turned back, but the sheriff took the lamp and stared curiously at the beam forming the top of the upright wall. It was only breast high, and between the roof-beams were openings which extended down under the eaves. The sheriff thrust a hand into one of these and brought it back empty. He tried another and gave a low whistle as his fingers rested on something in the shallow depths. He fished out a huge roll of paper money.

"Struck a trail!" he grunted, diving his hand into another recess. It was empty, but the fourth rewarded him with a bag of gold coins.

As fast as he retrieved the money he placed it on the trunk. At last he announced:

"That seems to be all. Some one seems to have done real well. Take the lamp."

De Croteau led the way to the table, where Williams dumped the money. It required some time for him to count it, for de Croteau refused to touch any of it. When he had finished his tabulations the sheriff gave the total as being a little over seventeen thousand dollars. This sum included what had been taken from the riding-boot.

He tied the paper money in one package, dropped the bag of gold into a capacious pocket and grimly said—

"Now we'll call on Enoch Lascar."

"But Santey may return and find the money gone and clear out," objected de Croteau. "Leave me here."

"Not for a million young turtles! You come along with me. I'll drop word for one of my men to watch this place. And, de Croteau, while it's my opinion that you're honest, I must remind you I don't decide a man's guilt or innocence. I go out and get the man named. Then it's up to the court. You lived in these rooms before Santey did. That riding-boot——"

"Was never mine. It belongs to Santey. I think he'll confess."

Leaving the boarding-house, Williams left de Croteau in the shadow of heavy shade trees and hurried to a saloon. He was soon back, saying—

"One of my boys will watch for Santey."

IT WAS with strange emotions that de Croteau found himself standing before the Lascar house. Williams whispered for him to keep back while he reconnoitered. In a few moments he softly called for de Croteau to join him.

"He's inside," whispered the sheriff. "Now remember you're on your good behavior. No funny business."

Treading softly, they gained the front door, and de Croteau stood to one side as the sheriff sounded the bell. A colored maid answered, and gave a startled yelp as de Croteau stepped into view and followed the sheriff into the front living-room.

Santey leaped to his feet and then sat down. Jessie Lascar stared in amazement. To de Croteau she exclaimed:

"You? Didn't you know——"

"That there's a price on my head? Yes. I've just found it out. That's why I am here."

Santey, who by now had recovered his power of speech, sternly demanded:

"What do you mean, sheriff, by bringing your prisoner here? This is all very offensive to Miss Lascar."

"It's bound to be offensive to more than one," gravely replied the sheriff.

The girl swept forward to de Croteau and fiercely asked:

"Why did you let yourself be caught? Haven't you shamed me enough? Oh, the misery of it!"

"Still thinking I'm a thief, I reckon," was the hoarse reply.

"Don't! Don't!" she begged. "I'll make father withdraw his offer of the reward. It never would have been made if I had known of it in time. You must be out of town before morning—gone for good this time."

Santey now had perfect control of himself. Before de Croteau could speak he had gently pushed the girl to one side, and, taking her place before de Croteau, was harshly saying:

"The law must take its course. He comes back and he must take the consequences."

The sheriff watched the two men silently. De Croteau was fighting hard to hold his temper in check. Possibly Santey believed it was fear that was keeping the young man speechless. He now turned to the sheriff and directed:

"Take him away! It was a fool notion to parade him here. You didn't have to do that to get the reward."

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"I tell you it sha'n't be that way!" cried the girl with passionate vehemence. "He must leave town at once."

Heavy steps sounded in the hall. Enoch Lascar, taking his after-dinner nap in his little library, had been aroused by the sound of their voices. He appeared in the doorway, blinking his eyes. He gazed in amazement at de Croteau for half a minute to make sure that the spectacle was not illusory, and then exclaimed:

"Good ——! Why didn't you stay away?"

Then de Croteau trusted himself to speak. He bitterly replied—

"It seems to be unanimous."

"Easy, everybody," quietly advised Bushrod Williams. "Count that money, Enoch."

And he tossed the package of paper money and the bag of gold on the table. It gave a staccato climax to the scene. The girl exclaimed aloud and clutched at her father's arm. The merchant made a groaning sound. Santey's eyes rolled to follow the money on the table, but his face remained hard and immobile.

"So you caught him with it on him, sheriff," he remarked.

Williams smiled sardonically. De Croteau trembled with passion as he glared at this, the last of his family's feud enemies.

"Father, say something! There must be no more public talk," excitedly cried the girl. "This thing must end right here in this room. You must tell the sheriff that. There must be no arrest."

"Count the money, Enoch," repeated the sheriff.

Lascar slumped down at the table and went through the money. As he returned the gold to the bag he sadly shook his head and said—

"I almost wish you had never recovered this, Bushrod."

"The trouble began when the money was stolen," curtly retorted the sheriff. "What do you make it?"

"Seventeen thousand and ninety-eight dollars," was the listless reply.

"I called it an even hundred. This money was found in one of the rooms occupied by Santey. I found some in a riding-boot, the rest under the eaves."

"They were de Croteau's rooms before they were mine," quickly interposed Santey. "He left in such a hurry he didn't dare enter the house."

Lascar's face grew haggard as he stared first at one young man and then at the other.

"It can't mean you're saying that Simon—" he began.

"Is that harder than to believe that a de Croteau took your money?" shouted de Croteau.

WITH a terrible anger flaming in her eyes, Jessie Lascar wheeled on de Croteau, and in a voice choked with emotion declared:

"You disgraced me once. But that wasn't enough. You weren't satisfied. Now you return to do this! Father, for the last time I tell you this must end in this room."

"It's gone too far to end in this room," violently protested Santey. "This fellow has the brass to charge *me* with pilfering. I demand that the law take its course.

"Found it in a riding-boot, eh? Any one will tell you I never ride, that I never have time, that I never owned a pair of riding boots. Find a man who ever sold me a pair.

"I moved into those rooms after Mr. Lascar generously increased my pay. I never disturbed de Croteau's effects. I was waiting for his father to show up and take them away, or send for them."

"Don't forget to add that you have charge of the books and are the only one who could steal and cover it up," de Croteau slowly reminded him. "And don't you forget, Mr. Lascar, that twenty-five thousand dollars were not subtracted from your assets at one jump. The money was taken in various sums and at different times and the books changed to keep it from you. If I hadn't run away as I did this man would have been a fugitive by now."

"Don't answer him, Simon," begged the girl. "I forbid you to answer him."

Then she leaned over her father and whispered forcefully. Lascar sighed and rose and said:

"I withdraw the charge, sheriff. I will even say I have made a great mistake. I want this to go no further."

"You tell me that, Enoch Lascar?" angrily cried the sheriff. "That you'll tie my hands by saying you never lost the money? What about the seventeen thousand dollars?"

"De Croteau stole it and shall serve time for it!" cried Santey.

The girl gestured for him to be silent and

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again prompted her father. Lascar said—

"I'll say the money isn't mine."

Williams was nonplused. The girl crossed to de Croteau and said:

"I've done this much for you. Take *your* money and go."

"Make a present of seventeen thousand dollars to a thief!" shrilly cried Santey.

Then all of de Croteau's stifled rage came to the surface. With a low cry he snatched the heavy gun from the sheriff's belt, thrust the muzzle against Santey's waistcoat, and hoarsely warned:

"Let no one move toward me, or I'll have a real killing to my credit. Williams, you keep back. I'll shoot if woman or man tries to interfere."

The sheriff checked his advance; the girl stood paralyzed with great fear. Lascar dropped into a chair and breathed heavily.

Santey's face lost its color as he felt the muzzle of the forty-four digging into the pit of his stomach, and his distended eyes registered his terror at what he read in de Croteau's pale face. In a trembling, jerky voice de Croteau told him:

"I reckoned my father was right when he wrote me that the old trouble between our families was ended and buried. I banked on his say-so. We both were mistaken; you've carried the feud on, only you've fought as the men of your family never fought before.

"Now there are eight thousand dollars not yet accounted for, and you will tell us where to find them before the clock strikes nine, or I shoot."

Santey's wild gaze swept to the clock, and he observed it lacked a scant minute before it would register the ninth hour. His forehead began to sweat. His breath came in gulps. He felt the gun probe deeper into his waistcoat. Williams shifted his weight from foot to foot and kept fumbling at his empty belt, his eyes hard and cruel, and yet not daring to interfere.

The girl would have flung herself between them, but she knew de Croteau would keep his word.

"Tell him anything!" she shrieked.

"Tell the truth," corrected de Croteau. "You don't leave the end of this gun until whatever you say has been tested."

There came a whirring of wheels as the mechanism prepared to strike the hour. It was punctuated by the click of the revolver being cocked.

With a scream Santey yelled:

"Wait! Wait! I took the money. False bottom in top drawer of my desk at the office! It's there!"

With a shriek the girl fell into her father's arms. The sheriff stepped forward. De Croteau warned:

"Keep back! Go search the desk. This man stays here—like this."

Lascar took the girl from the room. Williams followed, secured keys and ran from the house. The two men remained standing, Santey's face the color of parchment, de Croteau ever maintaining the pressure of the gun, and leaning slightly forward and watching his victim's eyes. Neither spoke; each seemed to be holding his breath.

The sheriff found a horse down the street and returned at a smashing gallop. Lascar opened the door for him and the girl followed the two men into the room. Without a word Williams tossed a package of bills on the table.

"Is every one satisfied I'm not a thief?" asked de Croteau without changing his position or shifting his gaze.

"Put down that gun!" roared Williams. "What the —— do you mean by bothering my prisoner? Santey, you'll go with me."

"Hold on," begged Lascar. "The money's returned. Let it end here and now. No publicity, Bushrod. I'll refuse to testify against him."

"—— you, Enoch! What do you mean?" cried the thoroughly exasperated sheriff. "Your bookkeeper turns out to be a thief after allowing you to accuse an honest man, and you think to muzzle me when I've run him down? It can't be worked, not for all the money in Missouri!"

Lascar turned despairingly to his daughter. Her face was white, but she held herself proudly as she told the sheriff:

"I had promised to marry this man. Perhaps you understand now."

Of all in the room there was none who so fully understood how she was suffering as did de Croteau. There was none other who could so deeply appreciate how hard it was for her haughty spirit to make that confession.

But she had not finished.

"Mr. de Croteau has been hideously wronged. He must be set right before the world. No one was kept quiet when he was believed to be guilty. No, father; don't speak. Now we know he is innocent the

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world must know it. That can only be proven by announcing this man's guilt. If no one else tells the truth, I will. Santey is a thief and it shall be known."

De Croteau had listened with the forty-four hanging at his side. When she finished he violently pushed Santey toward the door and swung the gun about to cover Williams.

"Keep your feet out of this, Williams," he warned. "This dog shall have the same sporting chance that I did. He shall ride for it. Santey, there's a horse outside and I give you five minutes start."

Santey plunged through the door. Williams raved and cursed, but did not attempt to pursue. They heard the rattle of furious hoofs, and de Croteau knew that his enemy was making for the great road leading south, and riding well despite his avowed ignorance of horsemanship.

Before the clock ticked off the five minutes he had time to wonder if the fellow would seek a refuge on Wolf Creek. Then he handed the gun to the sheriff.

DE CROTEAU stayed that night with the sheriff, and for several hours Williams was a surly host. He was so positive that his deputies would quickly capture Santey that he did not lead them in person. He was chagrined and disgusted to have them report early in the morning that they had lost the trail. When de Croteau came down-stairs he was more affable, as well as curious to know what the young man's plans were.

"I'm going back to St. Louis after it's thoroughly understood that Santey is the thief," gloomily answered de Croteau. "Then I'll fix things up with Dad and little *maman* and go to work."

"I reckon work might be good for you. You've tried about everything else," remarked the sheriff. "Nothing to stop you from getting work right here. I'm going to stick reward offers for that skunk 'way across the State, both ways. I'll start right here in Springfield after we've eaten. Have a mild snort before breakfast?"

"Neither before nor after breakfast," was the prompt refusal. "I reckon Dad will growl when he learns how I let the fellow go. But *maman* will understand."

"Your pap is some hellion when it comes to eating fire. When he was your age—Well, well. Glad he's simmered down. I'd have hated to have to shoot him."

"He'd have hated to have had you. You never stood a chance," retorted de Croteau with a grin.

Before the sheriff could frame an adequate reply to this bit of insolence Mrs. Williams bustled in and announced that a man and a young woman were in the front room waiting to see de Croteau.

De Croteau went to meet his early callers, wondering if it could be Lascar and Jessie. He hoped not. He was happily disappointed to behold the Rodneys. The girl seized both his hands and cried:

"Not till this morning did we learn where you were. No matter what they say, no matter what they try to do to you, we will never forget Wolf Creek and the Knob. We shall stay here until father has exhausted every possible method to clear you."

De Croteau dropped her hands and informed her:

"The sheriff trusts me. Last night he offered to keep me here instead of putting me in jail. It was for the night only, of course. Mr. Rodney, on your honor do you believe I am honest or a thief?"

Rodney hesitated for a moment; then he stoutly said:

"I won't believe you're dishonest. I'll stand by you to the end."

De Croteau smiled sadly. In his heart Rodney had a doubt; which was equivalent to believing the worst.

Francine angrily protested:

"Why speak like that, father? Either he is guilty or he is not. Mr. de Croteau, I do not believe it. If they had said it when I first met you I might have taken it for granted. For every newcomer to the creek was wanted for something.

"I was suspicious of you at first simply because you were pursued to that horrible place. But after what you did for us, and after that terrible fight, no one could ever make me believe you were dishonest.

"No thief could have done such a fine thing as you did when you made us go ahead and leave you to hold them back. I am as convinced that you are an honest man as I am that my father is an honest man."

De Croteau's face was heavily flushed as he stepped to the door and called in Williams and asked him to explain the true situation. While the sheriff talked, de Croteau waited outside on the porch. The girl came out first as her father remained for a final word

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with the sheriff. She was embarrassed, yet determined.

"The young lady the sheriff spoke of," she began. "You two should be friends again."

"Not the way you mean. She believed me a thief. Besides, she has too much pride. No; there'll be no remorse on that score on either side. What are your plans?"

"We go to St. Louis almost at once."

"I'm going there to see my folks. No harm if I travel along with you and your father?"

"You never asked our permission in traveling here with us from Wolf Creek," she answered.

"That was different. You had no choice," he muttered.

"I can choose now. Travel with us by all means."

AND in time law was reestablished in Arkansas, and her northern neighbor, one of the greatest States in the Union, drove the hard-riding, swift-shooting banditti from beyond her borders. But Étienne de Croteau cherished a certain sneaking fondness for the old bad days, and often lived some of them over in confidence with his grandson, François—an effort to follow his mother's name. More than once he told the youngster he should always regret the cursed legal restrictions which prevented him from ending an ancient feud in his own way.

"*Ciel!* To think a descendant of old Ardmore Santey lost the chance of dying with his boots on by becoming a thief. Let it be a lesson to you, young limb. Not a word to *petite grandemaman*, and I'll tell you how it all began. It was like this——"

HERDIN' SHEEP

by Mary Carolyn Davies

HERDIN' sheep is apt to make a fellow think of lots of things.
Herdin' sheep is apt to make a fellow wonder some.
Sittin' smokin' there alone a thousand miles from anywhere
Seems as if the universe was sort o' keepin' mum.
But it isn't—that's the time when out of all the silence
Comes a mighty secret spelled out to you word by word.
And you know the why of things, and wonder at your blindness
Not to seen it all before. I know. Because I've *heard*.

Herdin' sheep is apt to make a fellow think of lots of things,
Herdin' sheep is apt to put queer fancies in your head.
Fancies? They're not fancies! When you're out, cut off from all the world
Something else is out there, and I've heard the words It's said.
Wise words and true words—I couldn't quite repeat 'em;
Kind o' half forget 'em when I come to town, some way,
But at night-time when the sheep were like a gray-white sea asleep,
Then I'd listen, listen, to hear what It would say.

David once I've heard 'em tell used to herd the sheep a spell;
Moses too kept Jethro's flocks out on some far hill
All alone for weeks and weeks— *Tell you, Something somewhere speaks*
That for all the centuries has been a-keepin' still.
David he remembered, and Moses was held up by It
When the Jews got milling, that was still his guiding star;
What he'd heard—I've heard It too—in the night you hear It—
Cowboys call you crazy—*I* don't know—perhaps you are.

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CLEARED

By G. A. Wells

Author of "Clothes and the Man," "Below the Mark," etc.

THE *Trent*, salvage steamer, plowed along at a ten-knot gait through a sea as smooth as glass. On every hand the eye saw nothing but bright sunlight glaring against blue water. The sea was empty of all save the *Trent*. The air was sultry and threatened a storm, though even a storm would have been welcome did it cool off the burning air.

Morgan wakened about six o'clock, his half-naked body streaming sweat. The air below deck was stifling. He rolled out of his bunk and stopped only long enough to mop his body with a towel and get into his clothes before going up to the weather-deck to see what relief could be found there.

He stood for a space amidships looking over the dunnage stowed on the cargo-hatch. He noted particularly the chest almost as large as a piano-box, the same containing his diving-suit and thirty fathoms of the best ribbed rubber air-hose money could buy. Standing beside his chest was the chest of his side-kicker, the other diver, a man whom he had not yet met. The other chest was marked with its owner's initials painted in red on one end of the chest.

"Now I wonder who J. C. D. is?" Morgan muttered to himself.

The initials excited his curiosity. He could not remember any diver with such initials. Who was this other man and what sort was he? One must be careful about one's mates in the deep-sea diving profession, for quite often one's life hangs upon the steadiness, courage and resourcefulness of one's mate.

"Meet him at breakfast, I suppose," Morgan told himself.

He began to pace the deck, looking out upon the unruffled sea with glad eyes. He had not been on a deep-sea diving expedition for almost a year and he was thirsting for it. During the year he had been on harbor work, a work that he derided and detested. Morgan scorned harbor work as beneath the true diver and accepted such work only when nothing better offered, for he was primarily a deep-water man. Deep-sea diving held a fascination for him that nothing else could. It was his life, his chief interest in living since he had graduated to it from the diving-bell.

He was immensely proud to call himself a deep-water man, for in fact he was exactly that and nothing less. There was none better. His physical proportions were well-suited to the work. His heart action was as near perfect as could be and his leathery lungs resembled nothing so much as a blacksmith's bellows. Always he kept himself in the pink of condition, for it is the law that no man may be a deep-sea diver unless he keep fit. Wine, women and carousal plays no part in such a man's life.

Morgan had made all sacrifices willingly in order to reach his goal and stay there, for in his opinion deep-sea diving was the very pinnacle of all human endeavor. Not merely diving, understand, but deep-sea diving, or more specifically salt-water

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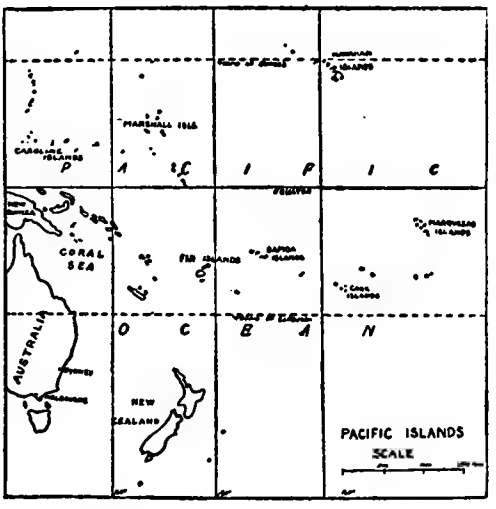
diving. Morgan religiously avoided fresh-water work. It was all very well to drink fresh water and to bathe in it, but it was quite unfit for diving. There was no depth.

What was a depth of eight or ten fathoms of fresh water? Bah! Mere child's play to the man who thought nothing of going down twice that deep. Morgan was never so comfortable as when encased in his diving-suit, the pump sending down the air he breathed through a hundred or more feet of hose. He loved the profession for its own sake.

Thus when Alden, general manager of Alden and Stover, salvage agents, cabled him at Manila, where he had just completed one of the detested harbor jobs, to come to Sydney and sign a six-months' contract for deep-sea work his heart sang with joy.

He cabled his acceptance at once and with his chest caught the first available steamer down, arriving at Sydney at ten o'clock the night the *Trent* left port. Except for the deck-watch he found the *Trent* deserted when he went aboard. The *Trent* was wait-



ing for high tide and the pilot who was to show her out to sea through the crooked channel. Morgan gave the watch-officer instructions concerning the transfer of his chest and other baggage from the ship not far away along the quay, then was shown to his room below where he immediately turned in.

When he came on deck next morning the *Trent* was well on her way toward her destination. Her destination was an island called Sofu, one of the Cook group. An island may be anything from a continent to a mere rock. Sofu was the latter, a mere jagged rock, low-lying in the sea, a trap set in the path of vessels by some designing devil to make trouble.

Certain it was that Sofu made enough trouble for the steamer *Kanan*, two thousand tons net, San Francisco to Melbourne with a mixed cargo invoiced at close to one million dollars, not to mention nearly half a million in gold bullion in the captain's safe for the Chinese government.

How the *Kanan* came to strike the outlying reefs of Sofu no one will ever know. Perhaps her navigator neglected to check up his calculations; maybe the chart was incorrect; possibly the watch-officer and his helmsman were lax in their duties; probably the wind and tide had conspired to set her just far enough out of her course to come in contact with Sofu's reefs.

Be the cause what it may, the fact remains that one night she struck on her port bow and had only time enough to back off into deep water and allow her handful of passengers and her crew to escape in the boats before she went to the bottom gurgling like a playful baby. Her skipper made a note of her position, then the boats pulled away to find a ship to rescue them.

The *Kanan's* owners sent a man out to examine her injuries. They decided to take their insurance and abandon her to the underwriters to do what they would with her. The underwriters were not so timid; they contracted with Alden and Stover to raise her one way or another, most likely by sealing her up and pumping her out. As the *Trent* was equipped with the necessary pumping apparatus the job was alloted to her.

MORGAN grew tired of pacing the deck and paused at the turn of the after-hatch to go below. The hatch was dark and narrow, as hatches for human accommodation generally are on salvage vessels where very slight consideration is given to the convenience of passengers. Morgan heard another man clumping up the hatch and drew back and waited.

When the other man stepped out on deck and caught sight of Morgan standing there beside the hatch he stopped stiff like a dog pointing a bird and his eyes squinted with

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shocked surprize. Morgan recognized the man instantly and his face went a brick red. He also took a quick backward step as if the other meant to strike him.

Morgan had not seen Jim Dulaney in eight years. He had not wanted to see Jim Dulaney, nor any other man who had been connected with that St. Lawrence River job in the old days when he, Morgan, was a sand-hog working in a diving-bell. He felt in his bones that he would never be able to face any of those men again, which offers the reason why he had cut loose from the American side altogether and had come out to the western Pacific and the Asiatic seas to do his work.

And of all that crowd he wished to meet Jim Dulaney least of all, for Dulaney and Burkhalter had been bosom friends.

It required but that single glance of recognition to bring flooding back into Morgan's mind those unpleasant memories that for eight years he had been gradually relegating to the background of his mind. It had been hard enough to forget, for horrors are always hard to forget, but in a large degree he had managed it.

And just this one sight of Jim Dulaney, Burkhalter's friend, had nullified the eight years of forgetting. The memories came back to Morgan more vividly than ever, as if memory wished to punish him for his neglect.

In a flash his mind reviewed the whole sickening tragedy. He saw himself alone with Burkhalter in a diving-bell fifty feet beneath the surface of the St. Lawrence River. They were digging down to bed-rock for the third of the four concrete piers that were to sustain the new bridge across the river. He and Burkhalter were loosening the wet sand and sending it up in the big iron buckets that came down to them through the several air traps in the big tube.

Morgan heard Burkhalter's warning cry and looked up from his digging to see the water bubbling in under the edge of the diving-bell. Apparently something had gone wrong with the air-pressure; a vent somewhere in the tube that led down from the surface. For a few moments Morgan was too paralyzed to act, and stood there staring open-mouthed at the in-rushing water.

When he suddenly turned he found that Burkhalter had already rushed up the ladder at one side of the bell and was opening the lower trap. In a trice Burkhalter had pulled his fat body into the trap until only his threshing legs and feet were visible. The threshing of Burkhalter's legs had seemed so grotesque to Morgan that he had paused for a space to watch them, and only when the water became knee-deep, as it did in no time at all, did he give a thought to saving himself. The idea of dying in that steel shell fifty feet under water struck him with terror. He went mad.

He screamed and leaped for the ladder. The single electric bulb that gave them light was dangling at the end of its flexible cord beside the ladder and Morgan's hand struck it. The thin glass shattered to a thousand fragments against the hard side of the bell and black darkness came down. Blindly Morgan leaped with up-stretched hands toward the trap. One of his hands closed about Burkhalter's ankle and gripped it tenaciously.

With the aid of Burkhalter's leg Morgan jerked himself upward and his other hand succeeded in catching hold of one side of the trap. Inch by inch he clawed Burkhalter back. Burkhalter kicked desperately to save himself. But he was fighting against a man who had for the moment gone mad and his struggles availed him nothing.

He fell and the clawing hand ceased to claw. Morgan gave his body another jerk and he was through the trap and in the tube and practically saved. Behind him he heard a splash and a choking cry in the swirling black water. He kicked down the cover of the trap and latched it to hold back the water and climbed upward.

When he reached the open air and saw the sunlight and heard the voices of his mates about him he grew sane as quickly as he had grown mad down there in that shut-in hole. A drink of whisky revived him. The boss asked him questions that he either answered unintelligibly or evaded altogether, then presently they sent him ashore in a punt and he stumbled off to his boarding-house in the little town on the river bank.

A hundred times that day Morgan lived through the drama that had been enacted at the bottom of the river. Cold sweat broke out upon him and he trembled, for now in his sober senses the enormity of his crime came home to him. Again and again he heard that choking cry and that splash and the swirl of the black water. He sent

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the landlady's boy out for a pint of whisky and drank the whole of it in a few gulps in an effort to quiet his shaking nerves. He might as well have drunk so much water.

Just after dark had settled a man came to his boarding-house and called him outside.

"Morgan," said the man, standing off from Morgan and looking at him loathingly, "I recall to mind you befriended me one time when I needed a friend bad, and maybe I owe you something on account. I'm here to tell you there's mighty ugly talk of you down there on the dock."

"What about this talk?" asked Morgan, a shiver running through him.

"They raised the bell and there was Burkhalter's body clinging to one of the cross-stays," the man answered. "They looked him over and found—things."

"What did they find?" breathed Morgan tensely, stepping forward and gripping the messenger's arm.

The man shook off the grip and with a growl stepped back.

"The legs of his pants were torn to rags and all over the legs they found marks like —well, the kind of marks finger-nails leave in the flesh when they're sunk deep enough. And the cover of the lower trap down and latched from the top side. There's plain talk down there in the engineer's shanty where they've got Burkhalter's body laid out. Dulaney is cursing you something terrible. You can take that for what it's worth, Morgan."

The man turned and strode away into the night. Morgan stood listening to his diminishing footsteps, then he whipped around and dashed back into the house. In his room he snatched up his hat and coat and a wallet of money from a bureau drawer. In a few minutes he was making his way across country as fast as his legs would carry him.

THAT was eight years ago. In eight years Morgan had about shut out from his mind all memory of the events of that day. At least when he thought of the tragedy he thought of it in the abstract; as of a possibility rather than an actuality. Now came Jim Dulaney to bring it all back with his presence on a ship at sea where there was no chance of escape. In his heart Morgan cursed the luck that had brought Dulaney there.

Why hadn't he guessed the identity of the man whose initials showed on one end of the big chest on the 'midship cargo-hatch? Who else in the world would have such initials but Jim Dulaney? But then who would expect to find Jim Dulaney deep-sea diving in the western Pacific? He was an American-side man and had always preferred fresh-water and harbor work. Why hadn't the fool kept to his own field? The thing hinted to Morgan of a retributive justice.

"So it's you and not somebody else, eh?" Dulaney broke the silence that followed their meeting.

"Glad to see you again, Jimmy," said Morgan with a forced laugh.

He thrust out his hand and Dulaney's lips curled.

"Your face gives the lie to your tongue, Morgan," Dulaney said. "And take back your hand, man; I'll not touch it for fear my own would wither and drop off. Strange it is that we meet again. Alden told me the name of my side-kick, but little did I think it was you. That other business had about slipped my mind and naturally I didn't connect up. Besides, you used to be a fresh-water sand-hog and I thought you'd never get above it. And now you're a deep-sea man, eh? You've advanced, Morgan."

"Diver for five years," mumbled Morgan.

"Too bad I didn't know it was you before we left Sydney," Dulaney went on. "I would have forfeited my contract bond and stayed ashore. Now I must go on because there's no handy way to get back, though I don't like the idea of working along with such as you. You'll never clear the murder that's chalked against you, Morgan."

"I've cleared it a thousand times, Dulaney!" cried Morgan. "——, how I've suffered!"

Dulaney laughed harshly.

"Only with your own life can you clear it," he said. "Your heart is black and your soul is rotten, and some time you'll stew in —— with better men than yourself, which is right."

"What worse torment can come than I've had!"

"You'll find it, thank God! You would have found it that night eight years ago when we came to send you after Burkhalter to try to square yourself with him. I put the curse of Shielygh on your head that night, Morgan, and it was little enough to pay you for what you'd done.

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"And now listen. I'll work with you because now there's nothing else can be done, but don't forget that every minute above or below water I'll be cursing you in my heart for the blood of my friend that's on your dirty hands. It's a thing you'll never clear on this earth, and only when you roast in hot cinders can it be cleared. That's all I have to say to you now and forever."

Dulaney spat on the deck and marched away. Sick at heart Morgan made his way below to his room and sat down heavily on his bunk and put his head between his hands.

Before noon Morgan discovered that Dulaney had told the story in detail and not a soul aboard the *Trent* but knew it. Thenceforth Morgan was a man set apart by his companions. He was rigidly ostracized. When others spoke to him it was from necessity and they spoke with reluctance. Wherever he looked he saw hostile and abhorrent eyes.

When he ate his meals in the general mess-room he ate in silence and hurried to get away. When he paced the deck for air he paced alone. When the others played cards to while away the tedious hours Morgan ate bitter fruit alone in some dark corner. When yarns were spun Morgan held his tongue. There was no place for him.

Even Alden, who had come along to take personal charge of the expedition, spoke to him seldom and sparingly. To Jim Dulaney he did not exist; Dulaney never so much as looked at him.

So they punished Morgan for what he had done eight years before and an almost unbearable punishment it was. Had they taunted him openly, reviled him by word of mouth, cursed him to his face, abused him physically, it would have been a relief. But theirs was a much more cunning punishment. They let him alone, a prey to remorse and the torment of a guilty conscience.

THE evening of the eighth day out from Sydney they sighted Sofu Island. Darkness was upon them when the *Trent* came to anchor near the spot where the *Kanan* had gone down. Alden had her location from the *Kanan's* captain. All hands turned in early that night, for weeks of exhausting toil lay just ahead and later rest would be at a premium.

And all hands were up correspondingly early next morning. By six o'clock breakfast was over. The engineer and his assistants gathered about the four big water-pumping engines below with wrenches and oil-cans. The fire-room gang pulled down coal from the bunkers and piled it convenient to the furnace doors. The chief machinist and his mates busied themselves with myriad lengths of five-inch pipe that were to connect the pumps with the *Kanan's* hold.

On deck the crew broke out the dunnage stowed on the cargo-hatches. Fathom after fathom of huge-linked hoisting chains clanked up from the forward lockers. Derrick booms swung back and forth like long fingers and hoisted small boats and big flat-bottomed scows over the side. The linesmen squatted on deck and ran signal and hoisting lines through their hands inch by inch and examined every one of the interwoven threads with microscopic care. Boats' crews were assigned and the air-pump men overhauled their pumps.

Dulaney on the quarterdeck and Morgan on the forecastle opened their big chests and laid out their diving-gear for inspection.

There was no diving that day, but shortly after breakfast the next morning Dulaney and his crew loaded their gear into one of the big scows and pulled out to a spot approximately above the sunken *Kanan*. There Dulaney donned his diving-suit and went down for the preliminary surveys. Each day for a week thereafter he went down, bringing up reports that caused certain things to be done aboard the *Trent*.

Dulaney reported that the only damage the *Kanan* had suffered was the hole in her port bow. He gave the dimensions of the hole as about ten feet long and half as much wide, the same extending latitudinally along the side five or six feet below the *Kanan's* water-line. Alden decided that the most feasible way to raise the *Kanan* was to patch the hole, seal the *Kanan* and pump her out, slinging her in the huge hoisting chains fore and aft and amidships to hold her steady.

A thick rope sennit mat was brought up from the *Trent's* hold. On either side of the mat the sailmaker and his mate sewed several layers of bull-hide canvas, varnishing each layer as it was put on. When all was ready Dulaney and Morgan were to take the mat below and bind it to the *Kanan's* side over the hole.

On the inside of the hull heavy angle irons,

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or stiffeners, were to be bolted across the hole to take up the outside water-pressure as the *Kanan* was pumped out. The water-tight sennit mat would have burst through with the enormous outside water-pressure without this reenforcement.

When the mat was in place the hatches, port-holes and all other vents were to be made water-tight and the four leads of five-inch pipe from the *Trent's* pumping engines let in through holes cut in the *Kanan's* decks. The *Kanan* would thus virtually be a sealed box.

During this time Morgan was an idle spectator and the idleness chafed him. He was eager to feel the pinch of his diving-suit about him, to feel the lead-soled shoes and the lead back and breast-plates pulling him down into the dark green depths of the sea, to hear the rush of water past his ears and the bubbling of the air from the escape valve in the top of his helmet.

It was not until the beginning of the second week they were on the job that Alden approached him.

"I want you and Dulaney to start putting on those stiffeners this morning," the manager said to Morgan. "It will take about two weeks to drill the holes and bolt the stiffeners on. They go on inside; you must keep the outside flush so you won't have any trouble getting the mat tight.

"The *Kanan's* hull is four-inch oak, you know, so that ought to make it easier to punch your holes than if you were working on a steel hull. There will be ten stiffeners in all. You couldn't work with timbers at that depth; they'd get away from you and bob up like corks. Dulaney says it's a little better than a hundred feet deep.

"He knows what's needed down there, and we'll send the things down to you as he calls for 'em. You've been on this kind of work before and know how to carry it out. If you don't, keep your eye on Dulaney and he'll set you right. He's using No. 1 scow; you take No. 2 and get your traps aboard and go out when Dulaney goes. I'll send the derrick scow out with you with the tools and other things.

"And by the way, Morgan," the manager added as if in afterthought, "Dulaney will be down there with you. If anything happens while you're down there——"

Alden walked away abruptly without finishing what he had started to say, but Morgan understood and his face flushed.

AN HOUR later the three scows, with the derrick scow in the middle, were moored side by side beside the marking buoy that Dulaney had set out. Morgan and Dulaney were standing overside their respective scows on the short ladders that reached down into the water having their helmets adjusted to the collar-bands. Presently the air-pumps were started and the crown plates screwed home on top of the helmets.

A smart rap with the flat of a hand on his helmet informed Morgan that he was on his own. He saw that his knife was in its sheath swinging at his belt, picked up his water-tight electric lamp and climbed down the ladder, feeling for the rounds with his lead-soled diving shoes. In a few moments he felt the surge of water about his neck.

At length he dropped free of the ladder and the hoisting line under his arms tautened. He signaled to lower away, and down and down by easy stages he sank. The water about him grew dark. Through the thick eye-glass in the front of his helmet he saw a greenish glow in the water not far away and clearly made out Dulaney's body swinging at the ends of his two lines and air-hose. Morgan switched on his own lamp and chuckled to see the frightened fish scuttle away.

The pressure of the water increased as he descended. Except for a slight buzzing in the ears, a quickening of the blood and a pinched sensation about the chest he felt no ill effects, though he had not been down so deep in months. Morgan's years of sand-hog work in a diving-bell at heavy air-pressures had trained him well for deep-sea diving.

He and Dulaney touched bottom at about the same time and within twenty feet of each other. Morgan turned his lamp to look for the *Kanan* and was a little startled to see her high bow towering right over his head. Doubtless his back had been turned toward her as he came down and his range of vision through the eye-glass in his helmet was restricted. Dulaney could not have calculated their landing more accurately.

Morgan studied the rip in the *Kanan's* bow. From the edges of the hole broken timbers stuck out like cruel teeth. Their first job, he knew, would be to smooth off the edges of the hole and prepare it for sealing with the rope and canvas sennit mat.

At Dulaney's signal the derrick men

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lowered away a bundle of tools consisting of wrenches, spanners, hammers, saws and such things, together with an iron ladder by which the two divers were to mount to the hole in the *Kanan's* side.

It required three days to smooth off the edges of the hole. Work under water at a depth of more than one hundred feet must in the nature of things be difficult and slow. Moreover, at that depth even experienced divers can not remain long at one time. Morgan and Dulaney were working on an eight-hour day. Dulaney divided the time into alternate hours—one hour down and an hour's recuperation on the scows.

When the edges of the hole were at last clean they climbed the ladder through the hole into the *Kanan's* hull, careful to keep their lines and air-hose free of snarls, the chief danger to the diver. Dulaney measured off the points for the twenty holes required to bolt the ten stiffeners across the hole, then set to work with a breast drill.

The drilling went terribly slow, handicapped as they were with their stiff rubber diving clothes, and the work of putting through the twenty holes around the rim of the hole occupied six days. The two men spelled each other at the drill. While one of them stood on the rib braces and turned the crank and guided the bit, the other stood below and pushed him against the breast-plate of the drill.

The holes punched, Dulaney passed the word to send down the stiffeners in a single bundle. He considered that the quickest and most convenient way to handle them. Once inside the hull the bundle could be broken apart. At the surface the total weight of the bundle was something near one ton, though a depth of one hundred feet in salt-water displacement would rob the bundle of some of this weight.

The bundle of stiffeners was therefore lowered to a point opposite the hole in the *Kanan's* bow and the two men inside the hull set to work to bring it inside. Due to the fact that the bundle was fourteen feet long and the length of the hole but ten feet they found it necessary to work one end of the bundle inside at a time. When one end had finally been brought in Dulaney held it steady while Morgan went to the other end to work that inside.

He had no more than seized the bundle than they felt tugs on their signal-lines. Their hour below was up. Morgan looked at Dulaney for instructions. Dulaney gestured that they would finish getting the bundle lowered away inside before they went up. Morgan was averse to staying down longer, but Dulaney was in charge and he went on with his work. The job of getting the other end of the cumbersome bundle of stiffeners inside the *Kanan's* hull proved to be rather stubborn, and ten minutes slipped by before it was accomplished.

By this time Morgan was beginning to feel uncomfortable. Of the two men he was the better diver; at least his physical condition permitted him to remain under water longer than the other. Yet even he was glad enough to avail himself of the hour's recuperation at the end of an hour's submersion.

Morgan told himself that Dulaney was a fool to remain overtime under water that way. He would very likely pay for his foolishness with a couple of days in his bunk with a fluttering heart and aching joints. Even then Morgan noticed his mate plucking nervously at his hose as if trying to coax it to give him more air. That was a bad sign.

Dulaney was paying for his foolishness now. By the time Morgan had got his end of the bundle inside Dulaney was seeing black specks before his eyes and his head was throbbing. Instead of warning him these symptoms maddened Dulaney. He could not see that Morgan was worried; he would show this red-handed murderer that there were other good divers.

He therefore stubbornly signaled Morgan that they would have the bundle lowered and release the hoisting-chain before they went to the top for rest.

Dulaney and Morgan stood at opposite ends of the bundle ready to guide it as it came down. Their lines and air-hose were, as they thought, clear. Dulaney signaled to lower.

At that precise moment on the derrick scow far above their heads the brake-band on the hoisting drum of the derrick snapped in two. The drum released, it began to whirl like mad. The men tried frantically to snub it, but the weight of the chain balked them. The chain ran out to the bitter end and the violent jerk snapped the holding bolt off. The end of the chain disappeared over the side of the scow.

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IN THE *Kanan's* hull the heavy bundle of stiffeners came down with a rush. One end of it knocked Dulaney down and fell across his ankles. Only the stiff leather uppers of his heavy diving-shoes prevented both his ankles being broken, though one of them was sprained. But Dulaney knew nothing of his injury. In falling his helmet struck the side of the hull, and the back of his head striking a projection inside the helmet Dulaney was rendered unconscious. To make a bad matter worse the overtime under water had sapped his resisting powers to a dangerous point. Unless he gained the surface and free air quickly nothing could save him.

At his end of the bundle Morgan had fared little better, though he had not been knocked out as Dulaney had been. Nevertheless he was trapped just as Dulaney was trapped. The bundle had fallen across his lines and air-hose, pinning them firmly to the side of the hull about three feet from his helmet. He discovered this when he tried to rise to his feet and failed.

He groped back over his head to learn the cause of his inability to rise. For the life of him he could not reach his hand far enough across the bundle to take hold of his lines and air-hose on the other side. Lying prostrate he was utterly helpless, his lines and air-hose allowing him a scant three feet of play.

Morgan did some fast thinking. As the situation stood they were both helpless, as he saw when he threw the beam of his lamp toward Dulaney and saw no movement. Dulaney was no doubt unconscious, as the bundle had not fallen in such a way as to kill him outright. Either he had been rendered unconscious in falling or from the prolonged pressure of the water. Morgan thought the latter.

At any rate, Dulaney was out of it and upon Morgan lay the responsibility for their escape. Once Morgan saw Dulaney's hoisting-line tauten and his body move, but the bundle lying across his ankles held him fast. Those above were doubtless alive to the situation, but they would pull the helmet from Dulaney's shoulders sooner than pull him from the grip of the heavy bundle that lay on his ankles.

Morgan himself could not signal above to hoist away for the reason that he could not reach his signal-line. Nor could he reach Dulaney's signal-line for the reason that at least eight feet separated him from Dulaney and he was held fast by his own lines.

It made no difference that Morgan was unaware that the hoisting chain had broken away from the derrick drum and its bitter end even at that moment lying a dozen or so feet away on the bottom of the sea. That did not mitigate the danger of the situation the least bit.

There was no other diver aboard the *Trent* to help them. Morgan knew beyond question that no other diver could be procured in time to don a diving-suit and come to their aid. Neither of them could hold out longer than half an hour, let alone days. Morgan was breathing hard and his heart was pounding like a trip-hammer. Furthermore, little red and white arrows kept darting before his eyes. If he, with his superior physical stamina, were suffering, what must be Dulaney's condition?

A sickening quiver passed through Morgan. He realized that his time to die had come. It was not for him ever again to see the sunlight, to breathe the free air, to hear the sound of men's voices. All that was as good as behind him now. It was ordained that he should lie there in the hull of a sunken ship at the bottom of the sea and die a lingering death, his diving-suit his shroud.

Then he realized with a start that his death would not be altogether unlike that of the man whom he had practically murdered eight years before. After all there is little difference between a diving-bell and a diving suit except in form and material. More than ever now it occurred to Morgan that a retributive justice had overtaken him, demanding that he settle his score.

One thinks of many things in little time under such circumstances. His thoughts ran back to that conversation he had had with Dulaney the first day out of Sydney.

"There's murder against you and you'll never clear it except with your own life," Dulaney had said.

Jim Dulaney had said that, and in the light of later events it had amounted almost to a prediction, for here he was lying trapped under a hundred feet of salt-water and death grinning in his face. And over there just out of reach lay Jim Dulaney, the man who had told him that, either dead or gasping his life away. Morgan stirred.

"Then I'll clear it right, Dulaney!" he cried, and the metal walls of his helmet

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threw back his words into his throbbing ears like peals of thunder.

He snatched the keen-bladed knife from the sheath at his belt and felt for the lines over his head. He slashed them off. Then he caught his air-hose close up to the point where it passed under the bundle and, squirming his body as much as he could to get slack, bent the hose back on itself in order to hold what air would remain in his big helmet. The keen blade went slicing through the rubber and he was free.

Holding his lamp and the clamped end of the air-hose attached to his helmet in one hand, with the other hand he pulled himself to his feet and quickly made his way to where Dulaney lay. He knelt and shot the beam of his lamp through the eye glass in Dulaney's helmet. Blood was oozing from Dulaney's nose, ears and mouth and his face was deathly white. But by the rising and falling of the flesh in the hollows of his neck Morgan knew that Dulaney still lived. There was more than a fair chance for Dulaney to live if he got to the surface, and Morgan purposed to give him that chance.

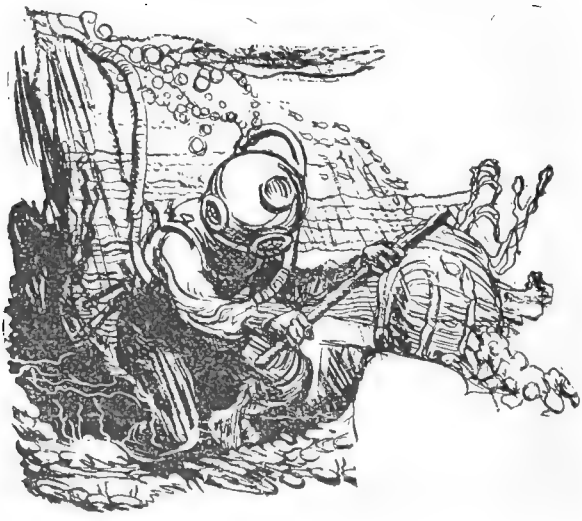
Fortunately Morgan found one of the long spanners they were to have used lying at his feet. Slipping one end of it under the bundle that lay across Dulaney's ankles he gave it an upward tug and the bundle went rolling down the slope of the *Kanan's* hull.

Still gripping the lamp and the end of his hose with one hand, Morgan half-dragged and half-carried Dulaney to the hole in the *Kanan's* side. He jerked Dulaney's signal-line to hoist away. Morgan prayed to hold out until they started to hoist Dulaney. By now he was gasping for the air in his helmet that he was breathing over and over again and he could scarcely keep his feet, so weak was he.

Then the line under the unconscious Dulaney's arms tautened and, under Morgan's half-blind guidance, Dulaney passed through the hole and went soaring toward the surface and life.

"That clears you, Dulaney!" choked Morgan. "And now I'll—find my lines—and get—out of——"

He pitched forward on his face and rolled down the side of the hull and brought up against the bundle of stiffeners. The glass of his lamp smashed and velvety blackness came. Morgan lay still. For a few moments there was a gurgling inside his helmet and bubbles rose from the end of the hose that had dropped from his hand. Then silence.



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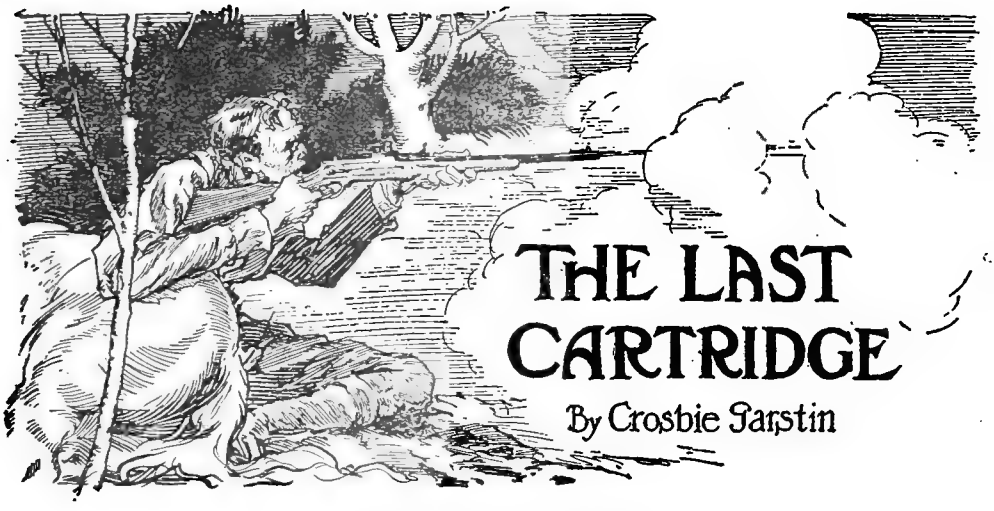

THE LAST CARTRIDGE

By Crosbie Garstin

Author of "The Electric Horse"

GALBRAITH reached his cattle-post an hour before sundown. It was some ten miles from his farm on a bend of the Bongola River where the water and grazing were comparatively good. The cattle were coming in as he arrived, crashing through the undergrowth on the river-bank; the herd boys whistling shrilly and belaboring the rumps of laggards with the hafts of their knob-kerries. Galbraith took station at the *kraal* entrances and counted them in with the accuracy of long practise. They numbered correctly. He ticked off the figures in his note-book, tossed a plug of tobacco to his boss-boy, a mahogany-colored Bushman with a tuft of white cotton under his chin and the red eyes of a hemp-smoker, and then turned his new pony homewards. His way lay over some miles of "black pan," arid, uninhabitable country; in wet weather an impassable slough, now dry and cracked.

Far away to the west loomed his home beacon, the great, solitary Tiger *Kopje*, rearing its jagged head into the sunset like some huge animal basking in the red glow of a fire.

Galbraith lifted his pony into a lope and slipped along over the pan, swinging rhythmically in the saddle, hat over his eyes, a blue streamer of smoke trailing from his pipe, the hoofs beating like leisurely and muffled drums. It had a comfortable gait, the pony.

Galbraith was thoroughly pleased. He had only bought it two days before and this was his first long ride. He lifted into a slightly faster canter, then sat back and jogged it down again. He bent it to the right and left, using his weight alone, never touching the reins. The animal responded without a hitch. McCarthy had schooled it perfectly, perfectly.

Galbraith wondered why McCarthy had sold it to him so cheap, had sold it at all in fact. McCarthy was a pretty astute dealer where horse-flesh was concerned. In debt again, he supposed; McCarthy was perenially short of money. Oh, well, it was an ill wind that had blown *him* some good at any rate.

He leaned forward and patted the Arab's arched neck. The pony's forelegs went from under it as if tripped with a rope. Galbraith saw the hard pan leaping up to smash his face and flung himself backward, tugging at the reins with all his strength.

The pony floundered along on its nose and knees for a few yards and then recovered itself. Galbraith pulled up and looked behind for the crack or tussock that had thrown his mount. There was none, the track was as smooth as a garden-path.

A cold rage possessed him. Now he knew. McCarthy had sold him a pup, a confirmed stumbler. He would ball McCarthy up for this—when he got back. He ought to have suspected it, an unblemished, well-schooled, good-looking,

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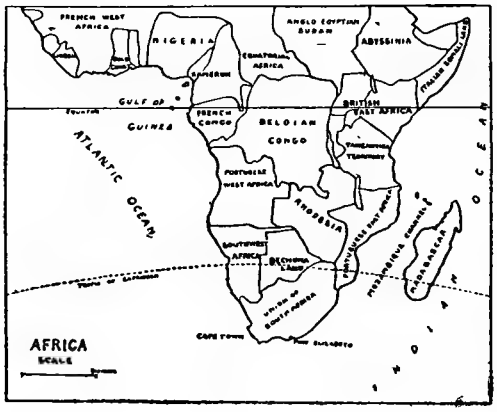
four-year-old for seventeen pounds from McCarthy. These cursed Arabs were all the same. They tripped over their own shadows.



He ought to have known. He examined the pony. Its nose was a trifle grazed but its knees were unbroken, only dusted slightly. As long as the confounded death-trap did not actually hit a stone it could go on falling on the *veldt* three times a day for the rest of its life without showing a betraying mark, Galbraith told himself.

WELL, he would have to risk getting home on it, anyhow. He mounted again and rode on cautiously, keeping the pony's head up and sitting well back. The animal resumed its easy lope as if nothing had happened. Two miles went behind, three, four.

Galbraith began to regain confidence.

Might have been an accident, a second's drowsiness combined with his sudden shift forward to pat it. It certainly was a comfortable little creature. Might be all right after all. They passed through a patch of brown elephant-grass into a belt of mopani-scrub and there away to the right Galbraith's quick eye caught sight of something moving—a bush buck. He wanted meat and he had his rifle with him, slung to his elbow and standing in an old pattern yeomanry bucket.

The rifle was already loaded with the safety-catch shut, ready for instant use. He jerked the pony up with his left hand, lifted the rifle with his right, dropped to the ground and almost simultaneously fired. Bush shooting is snap-shooting; he who hesitates goes hungry. His bullet took the buck too far back—somewhere in the quarters, he thought. It squatted for a second, as if its hind legs had slipped, then picked itself up and made off eastward toward the river. Galbraith fired again but a flick of dust a yard to the left signaled a miss.

He cursed heartily, jerked the smoking case out of the rifle-breech, felt in his pocket and found one more cartridge, loaded and mounting the pony cantered down to where he had last seen the buck.

He had hit it, he knew, and intended to get it. He wanted meat and, incidentally, had a strong dislike of "runners," of leaving wounded game out in the bush to die slowly and painfully; apart from the cruelty of the thing, it offended his pride in his own marksmanship. But he would have to hurry, it was getting dusk and before long he would not be able to see.

He rode at a fast canter, bent over the pony's off shoulder peering for spoor. It led him due east through the scrub—blind, treacherous country. The wounded buck was bleeding heavily and from the marks it made in the dust was dragging its hind legs. It could not be good for much more, he thought, still in that failing light, once among the thorn on the river-bank it would be next to impossible to find it without a dog.

He kicked the pony's ribs with his heels and went on faster and faster. The buck was next to all in; a dark spatter of blood under a bush and marks on the ground where it had twice fallen down told him that. He should be on it in a——

They brushed through a flimsy tangle of mimosa-bushes on to the lip of a *donga*—a dry water-course, a sharp gash in the earth, filled with ironstone boulders and fifteen feet deep.

Galbraith shouted a frantic—

"Whoa!" to the pony and flung all his weight against its mouth. It snorted, propped wildly with its forelegs, slithered right to the very edge of the crevice and tripped again.

WHEN Galbraith came to his senses he was lying on the stones at the bottom of the *donga* with the pony across his right leg. It was quite dead and from the unnatural way its head was bent under it he knew that its neck was

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broken. As for himself every bone in his body was smashed, he thought. He was one excruciating ache.

He must have hit his head on a boulder as he fell—it throbbed painfully and his right eye was full of blood—must have been knocked out for at least half an hour, as only a narrow slit of lemon-colored afterglow now showed in the west; in a few minutes it would be night. Faintness came over him once more, he battled it grimly back.

"No good fainting," he groaned. "Must think—do something."

He stirred his arms carefully to ascertain the extent of the damage. They both moved, as did also his left leg. Only badly bruised after all; the pony had broken most of his fall. Now for his right leg, the one that lay under the animal. He pulled it very gently. Pain shot up the limb as if on white hot wires, Galbraith dropped his head back on the boulders with a moan and lost consciousness again. He opened his eyes to a full night of stars. A pale silver mist in the east presaged the rise of the old moon. The pain in his leg reminded Galbraith poignantly of his position. It was quite hopeless. He could not move and there was nobody to help him. He was out in the middle of an unpeopled waste, beyond hail of the nearest Kaffir path. His own boys would never think of searching for him; he was in the habit of leaving his farm for days together without warning and going on visits. His absence would cause no alarm. No, he was completely trapped. He would lie there, pinned by the weight of the dead pony on his splintered leg, until slow death released him. The thought terrified him, shook him off his balance, and he shouted for help once, twice and again; screamed piteously into the empty wilderness like a child frightened of the dark. An echo in the *mopani* tops repeated his cries three times, faithfully, mockingly, reflecting his terror. He lay down quietly once more, panting and ashamed.

It was a possibility all dwellers in lonely lands had to face—this. Galbraith in his goings up and down the world, had known many such, solitary trappers severing a foot with a slipped ax and bleeding to death miles from help; prospectors caught by falls of ground; boundary riders kicked or thrown from their horses—even as he, even as he.

He wondered how those other men had fronted the long last hours? Nobly or ignobly? Nobly for the most part, he thought. He remembered a hunter found dead of thirst in the Khalihari with a scrawled note to his wife in his hand, a note full of tender solicitude for her and not a word of himself; a timber-cruiser freezing to death under a dead-fall on the Athabasca scratching *"Resurgam"* on the bark of the tree that held him. Hard men dying hard. He too would die game.

He had a sudden desire to finish cleanly, to leave no bills unpaid. He puzzled his aching head to remember things he had left undone, things he might possibly rectify, but could think of nothing—nothing within his reach now. As for his immediate affairs, everything was in order, his property willed where it was most needed.

Stay—there was McCarthy. His own bushmen would seek and find what was left of him some day and McCarthy would blame himself. McCarthy was a good chap at heart, only an invalid wife at home kept him perpetually pressed for money. He would not trouble McCarthy's sleep, poor ——! He would write something in his note-book to set McCarthy's mind at ease.

"Galloped pony over edge in the dusk"—something like that.

He felt in his hip pocket for the book but could not find it. Must have dropped out as he fell. He fumbled about among the boulders without success, then his hand touched steel—his rifle barrel. He drew the weapon toward him, breathing deeply. It was undamaged and there was still one cartridge left in it. One was enough—all he needed. There would be no eternity of waiting now, no age-long hours of thirst, starvation and pain in the eye of the tropic sun, loathly vultures perched on the tree-tops about him; hyenas slinking nearer and nearer, biding their hour.

Freedom was at hand, would come in a flash, swift and merciful. He was not troubled by any question of ethics; circumstances are stronger than laws. He had no dependents; his life was his own and he was merely speeding the inevitable. He would take the muzzle in his teeth, press the trigger with his toe and——

Laying the rifle down, tenderly, beside him, he crooked his free leg backward and began to unlace the boot. A sudden noise

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as of something struggling violently a few yards to his right brought all his hair on end and his head round.

"Who's there?" he shouted, startled. "Who's there?" the echoes repeated away in the empty bush. "Who's there?"

There was no answer to his call and the noise stilled as suddenly as it had begun. The moon had lifted clear of the tree-tops and was flooding the gully with milky light. Galbraith peering in the direction from which the noise had come made out a curious dark blot or shadow against the far side of the *donga*. As he watched, it moved, bobbed up and down quickly several times, kicking against the boulders, and then lay still again. It was an animal of some sort, in difficulties.

"That buck—that buck I wounded," Galbraith muttered. Half-blind with pain it had fallen headlong into the *donga* and was too crippled to get out.

"My——, what a mess! What a mess! All three of us—pony, me and you—broken to bits and piled up in this —— *oubliette*," Galbraith groaned. "What a howling mess—and all my fault!"

The buck struggled and floundered afresh, beating itself against the stones like an imprisoned bird against a window.

Galbraith set his teeth. Poor brute! Must be going through the same torture that he was—only worse. And all this through a slovenly shot. If he only had another cartridge he'd put it out of its pain first—make a clean job of it. But he had no second cartridge, so there was no more to be said. He continued unlacing his boot. The buck sighed twice, brokenly.

"Want my last shot do you?" Galbraith snarled. "Well, you won't get it, it's booked, so give over."

He kicked his loosened boot away, peeled off his sock to give his big toe play and picked up the rifle.

Now for it. Good-by life. It had been good, full-flavored and robust all through. There were few regrets. His debts were all paid, he could— The buck emitted another sigh, long drawn and quivering. Galbraith's hand dropped slowly. Were all his debts paid? He was leaving a "runner" on the debit side, to soil the record of his clean hunting, abandoned a poor mangled brute to a fate he dare not face himself.

"Dare not!" Ugly words, but true nevertheless. "Dare not!" Was he who had breasted forty strong years of life to cringe before the last few hours? Those other men had seen it out to the end. That timber-cruiser might have cut his throat with his knife. He had not; he had carved "*Resurgam*." That hunter might have shot himself with the gun they had found beside him. He had not; he had written to his wife. "My dear, my dear, I pray all may go well with you." A sudden desire to hold his head up to the finish possessed Galbraith, a quixotic impulse to pay his last debt in full.

"Dare not!" Yes, he too could play the man! In spite of the agony his leg caused him he twisted round and brought the butt to his shoulder. The moonlight had washed the *donga* wall with light; he could see the dark blot the buck made quite plainly; the moonlight touched his foresight with a white spark; he brought it to bear on the blot and pressed the trigger. A jet of flame spurted, the crash of the report roared up the gully and went echoing away among the tree-tops. The buck jerked itself in the air, fell and lay still.

Galbraith sank back among the stones, shaken with hysterical laughter.

"You fool! You fool!" and oblivion took him in its arms.

Gray mists, cool and soothing, flowed all about him. He had a holiday from school and was on the cliffs of Moher looking across Galway Bay. Presently the sun would come out and he would see Aran far away; a blue smudge on the silver sea. Billy Scarlett walked out of the mists and waved his hand to him. Billy Scarlett shot in Mexico, defying Pancho Villa, years ago. Terry O'Mara mauled by a lioness on the Tana River in 1908. Carlo Rangoni, Steve Henry and Van Roien, killed on the Western Front.

Friends of his youth, true and trusted, "men slain in fight with their bloody mail about them" come back to him across the meads of asphodel. They nodded and smiled to him, but when he held out his hand he could not touch them, some barrier of mist separated them still. Their kindly faces faded. He called— "Terry! Carlo!" There was no answer; they were gone.

The mists enveloped him again, but charged with light now. In a minute they would break and he would see Aran across the shining water. Something had him

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by the shoulder, shaking him. His dream evaporated like wind-blown smoke. He woke into instantaneous, bitter consciousness once more. He was in the *donga*, under his horse, in mortal pain and *they*—the foul bush undertakers—had come for him already. He grabbed up his rifle to club the first comer—then let it fall again. The wrinkled, anxious face of his Bushman boss-boy was bending over him.

"The *baas* dropped his little book by the *kraal*. I followed the pony's spoor—it was plain in the moonlight—and have brought it to him," he said. "The *baas* is hurt?"

Relief, overwhelming and inexpressible, swept through Galbraith like a flood. Life, glorious, infinite life was his once more. Yet still he did not quite understand. "But—but what made you look for my spoor out here?" he inquired.

"Morain, I heard a rifle shot," said the boy.

By J. P. Leland

OLD RANTER, BLUE & BLAZE FACE

Author of "The Man-Eater"

JOHN HOLLAND and Uncle Mose sat on the bluff above Bee Rock and waited for the dogs to open. Just a suspicion of warmth was in the air, and the south wind was laden with a promise of the coming Spring.

Uncle Mose had been a slave of the Holland family and had taught John his first lessons in woodland lore. When John had grown up and drifted out into the world, the old darkey had stayed around the old homestead. He was there when John returned, after the doctors had told him that his lungs were affected, and that he would have to take to the open, so he picked up the old negro and moved to Arkansas. Uncle Mose was southern reared and they quickly drifted into the dreamy life of the old régime. They were the "Young Ma'sr," and the "Old Uncle," and so far as they were concerned, the Civil War had never taken place.

Uncle Mose brought two of his old breed of dogs from Missouri. They were not the clean-limbed, fine-haired thoroughbreds that John admired, but they were the heart's delight of Uncle Mose. With faces scarred by many battles, their sprung joints and gnarled and broken nails gave mute testimony of the endless trails that they had followed. Deep chests—long narrow heads spoke of endurance and acumen to solve the enigmas of the wood and fields; and back of their dreamy eyes lurked knowledge of the primitive.

"Ma'sr John," the old man would say, "done yo' 'member Ole Ranter, an' Ole Blue dat was out to yo' Granma's when yo' was a boy? Well, dese two are jess lak' 'em—same stock. Yo' Granpa brung hit plum from Virginny. I'se had an Ole Ranter, an' Ole Blue ever sense befo' you was borned."

The old man was a skeptic when it came to town-bred dogs. John's pedigreed

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Walkers and Birdsongs were well-cared for and Uncle Mose admired their speed, but he never considered them in the same class with Old Ranter and Old Blue.

He would shake his wooly head and say: "Dey fass, Ma'sr John, dey runs—dey ketch any fox dat don't dodge, but what dey gwine ter do when dey lose de trail? Jess run aroun' in de woods an' bawl, an' wait for de ole dogs to come an' straighten dem out."

He loved to tell tales of their prowess. That night, while they waited for the start, John coaxed him into relating his favorite yarn. He would act out every motion of the dog or fox. Imitate every sound, and in the still moonlight, there was something so delightfully weird in his motions and enunciation that it would amuse John more than anything that he had ever heard.

With an exquisite mimicry he would voice the baying of the running pack. You could close your eyes and see them streaming through the valley—lusting along a burning trail—a miss—a note of querulous perplexity, and they were off again. It was not the imitation of barking dogs; it was the cathedral toll of Old Ranter, that soothed with crisp harmony. It was the little thrill of discontent you felt when he intoned the litigious notes of Old Blue.

The old fellow would snuggle down in the soft leaves, or against the smooth side of a rock and begin:

"Ma'sr Will Givins, and Ma'sr Romy McGraw came by my hous', one day. Dey had a lot er hongry-lookin' houn's dey ship in from som'whurs. Dey say, 'Nigger, we gwine out to de Elkins place to ketch er fox, an' we want yo to take keer our extra hosses. Hop on yo mewel—bring dem ole 'possum-dogs an' less see what dey can do'.

"Well, Ma'sr John, yo know Old Ranter an' Ole Blue done lak ter hunt none too well when dey ir roun' strange dogs, so dey keep close to me. Dem town dogs ramp roun' in de woods 'n purty soon—'Bow-wow, Bow-wow, Bow-wow'! Dey was gone.

"I sot on de fence an' waited. Arter er while I heered Ole Blue up on de hill er'whistlin'. Ranter went to him. Den, all ter wunce, Bing-Bong, Bing-Bong, Bing-Bong, Ole Ranter, he open. Den right behine him, O-o, O-o, O-o, Ole Blue!

"I set dar er long time. Dey done gone out er hearin'. I know dey come back 'cause dat ole varmint had his den over in Miss Ann Snell's pasture. Well, longer bout midnight I heered dem er comin', an' as dey clim' over de hills at White Oak Ridge I heered dem town dogs first— Bow-wow, Bow-wow, Bow-wow! I listen er while, den trrrectly, Bing-bong, Bing-bong, Bing-bong, Ole Ranter! Den, O-o, O-o, O-o, Ole Blue!

"Jess den Ma'sr Romy, he rid up ter change hosses. He say: 'Nigger, yo' dogs is er doin' purty well. We gwine ter ketch him afore long. Put a blanket on dis hoss—clime on yo' mewel, an' come on'.

"I heered dem cross de Bone Fam (*Bonne Femme*) at de bridge up by de Hensley place, an' knew he gwine ter go roun' Nipper's Hill an' hit de ruff groun' back de yuther side ob de Ole Hughes farm, so I cut right frew town to het 'em off. When I git ter Mr. Lige Gutherie's orchard I waited; he sure to cross de road dere. Well, dey muss er went up nearly to Burton, 'cause hit was jess gettin' light in de eas', when, way back yander in de woods, I hear— Bing-bong, Bing-bong, Bing-bong, Ole Ranter! Den, O-o, O-o, O-o, Ole Blue!"

That was as far as Uncle Mose would ever go with his narrative. Old Ranter and Old Blue had outdistanced the town dogs; that finished the story.

The two old hounds had passed a strenuous Winter. They had not the recuperative powers of the younger dogs. They could no longer keep well to the front. Their trail-worn feet would never falter, but their speed was gone. Always at puzzling points, it was their part to fathom out the mystery, but once the scent lay clear the youngsters forged ahead. The old dogs were seldom at the kill. This was a source of much hidden sorrow to Uncle Mose; the old darkey hated to see his favorites distanced.

They had caught most of the fox that denned around Bee Rock, but knew, with the mating-season coming on, that some of the big males that lived up the river, would range nearer town. There was a rumor of an old white face that could not be caught. He had played with the mountain dogs for years; but Uncle Mose believed that, with the youngsters to set the pace, and Ranter and Blue to keep him always on the move, they could get him.

He groomed these old friends of his for the great event. He kept them always in leash until after the start. He called them off when the ground was rough, to cut in

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again, only in case of a stall or toward the finish, or in easy running through the open woods. But tonight they were fit, and the old man turned them loose.

Off on the hillside that skirted the little valley above Griffin Springs, a deep-toned bay rolled down across the woods. Old Ranter had struck—close up! Just a little behind, a mournful complaining wail—Old Blue!

The young dogs came with eager yelps. The race was on!

IT WAS just the right sort of night for an old dog fox to cover the uncharted miles of rock and scrub and vale that bordered the Little Red. The spirit of romance was surging hot in the blood of Old Blaze Face, and somewhere out there, under the blue dome and the countless stars, he was seeking a mate.

All through the Winter he had made his own trails, and snarled at the approach of his erstwhile associates; but with the first scent of the fresh mold that rides north upon the Winter's breeze the old habits are forgotten, and beast, like man, is stirred by sweeter songs than those of solitude.

Up around the rocky fastness of Salt Creek, Blaze Face had denned for many Winters. Life had been for him a placid symphony of peace and contentment. The Hill boys had dogs, of course, but they were mixed in breed, and it was play for him to *distance* or outwit them. In fact, it was a pleasant recreation for him to wind and climb around the mountain's rim until the ill-assorted packs of fox and coon and 'possum-dogs had become separated. The good trailers, long-headed old fellows with pendent ears and clumsy joints, had soon been left behind, and the few really fast ones, that could keep him on the move, were too impetuous and eager to figure out his trail when he cared to hide it.

For many years he had teased the mongrel packs of the mountain men, and in his heart was a profound contempt for all of them, and an abiding faith in his own invincibility, his wit, his knowledge of the difficult, dim paths they could not follow.

How many times had he, deliberately, crossed the track of some resourceless young whelp, that they were chasing, and led them over the flint paths until with sore feet, and lolling tongues, the slow wise trailers had given up and quit; and then how easy it had been to skirt the damp spots—the rocky ledges—to run the leaning trees, then work his way along the wind-swept shelves of the upper reaches of the hills, to lie down on some moon-bathed rock, and watch and listen to the baffled few below.

Still, even that worthless bunch of hounds had taken its annual toll from his kind. Many an inexperienced, overconfident yearling, young and conceited, had tried to follow his tactics—to emulate his example. Without his depth of lung and iron thews, they had dallied too long, jeering fox talk at the coming pack, until feeling their infant muscles fail, they had gone over the hills toward Armstrong Springs, to lose their pursuers in the broken ground beyond, only to have the Butler boys cut in with fresh dogs and run them down.

Blaze Face had saved a few, who with heaving sides, and fear-stricken eyes, had labored back to the old stamping-ground, but it had been out of mere wanton playfulness. Mercy and love were not attributes of his, and unless he felt in the mood to run he never crossed the track; then the poor victim was either picked up in his last mad race to reach his den or was "holed" in some shallow cup in the rocks, to be easily dragged forth and done to death.

Even those who got safely back to the deep grottos that lined the bluffs of Salt Creek would, foolishly, venture forth too soon and stiff and sore; weak with dens' damp and hunger, would be caught the next time they were jumped.

Before Mr. Holland came, and the Hill boys got their packs, there were no real fox-dogs along the ridge, from Searcy to the cliffs of the Boston Mountains. A coon hunter would, occasionally, go shouting through the woods, at night, but his ill-assorted gang of "Pot-lickers," and mixed curs, would not even recognize the scent of a fox when they encountered it. Then Reynard was in his glory, at least as far as numbers go. Both reds and grays were thick, but food was scarce. With the coming of the better dogs the silly grays were soon exterminated, and even a young red would fall before them now and then.

John Holland brought good dogs from the North; kennel-bred, it was true, but the blood was there, and with a few wise old boys to lead, they soon cut down the woodland population.

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With fewer mouths to feed upon their natural prey, the denizens of hill and dale waxed fat in peace and numbers. Sleek rabbits hid in every little swale, and plump young quails were noisy and plentiful.

Blaze Face had thrived. His old home den was his castle—his larder stocked with every delicacy his appetite could crave. He was just in his prime. His thick and glossy coat made golden streaks across the hills as he pursued his prey. Each hair of the great brush that streamed behind him was a magnetic wire of animal vitality.

With the coming of John Holland and Uncle Mose, life for him took on a more serious tone. One night in mid-Winter he heard far off across the tangled miles of scrub a new pack running hot upon the trail. He could hear the eager babble of the younger dogs, close up behind their quarry. There would come a burst of sounds, whose echoes shook the hills, sinking to a murmur as they crossed some hidden draw, to swell again upon the rise. Young dogs, he knew—strong, fast young dogs. They were running well together—sometimes by sight. Well, what of it? They were not upon *his* track. What matter if they were? Of the many that had followed him, none ever yet had stirred his heart with craven fear.

They were going toward the Boone Bottoms. They were after Old Vixen, his last year's mate. Well, she would lose them in the swamp. She was too old and wise to fall before a bunch of youngsters. What matter if she did? Next Spring he meant to find a younger mate. She was crabbed and uncertain of temper; a devil incarnate outside the breeding-season. There were the daughters of his last year's litter. Some young female would move in from up the river. It was not the time to think of matrimony. Why care?

What was that? Silence. They had lost her before they even reached the swamp. No; two with strange mouths were still giving tongue. One clear-cut as the little church at Mt. Moria—the other with a long-drawn O-o. How Blaze Face, instinctively, hated the very sound of it! There go the rest—full cry in the distance. Well, she'll lose them, anyway; if not, why worry?

A few days later he came across a fragment of fresh meat in the path near the entrance of his den. He did not stop to reason how it came there. Rabbit, quail, the usual wild game had cloyed upon his taste; foolishly he started to devour it, but paused at a peculiar flavor. He was just in time, for he learned once more the perfidy of man. It was poisoned. He did not die for he was wise enough to stop his matutinal repast in time, but it made him deathly sick.

In the days that followed, moping in his den, reason—instinct—call it what you will, told him that he would not be safe in the old ranging-ground with these new dogs, so when he was strong enough to travel he moved up the Little Red to new fields.

What did he find there? Grays, grays, everywhere; no red fox at all. For awhile this was all right. He did not have to associate with them; he preferred his own company and they left him severely alone. In a few short weeks he was himself again.

His old spirit of egotism returned. Why not go back to the old hunting-ground? He was as strong as ever. His old den was there to shelter him. It was Home—his home, and if any one had dared preempt it, let them beware!

He heard the call of a wild goose speeding north. A solitary old gander. There was loneliness and heart-hunger in his doleful cry. Yes, it was mating-time. Some pretty female of his race was there, receptive, lonely, waiting to be wooed and won. He wrinkled the tip of his jet-black nose, sniffed the fresh fragrance of the swelling buds, and started home.

BLAZE FACE had returned to his old home run. Conditions there had changed; for, as a general thing, while there was a scarcity of rabbits as the Winter waned, now the woods were teeming with them. This was unusual. A healthy fox seldom fails to account for one or more a day; they are his natural food.

Taking a ten-mile circle, with the junction of the Little Red and the mouth of Salt Creek for its center, at least a dozen foxes had denned within its radius, to the west; besides, there would be the occasional visitors from across the river—from Bee Rock and over beyond Griffin Springs. At this season of the year the woods were usually full of courting youngsters, eager to contract their annual family ties.

Now, for some reason, they were missing. For a week Blaze Face ranged the wood,

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searching for a mate in vain. Finally he despaired of his earlier hopes of a young bride and crossed over to the swamps that fringed the Boone Bottoms. Old Vixen would be there, and likely unattached. She would be the last to mate; not from choice, but from necessity. She, too, was gone. He worked every slash—disappointment again. Not the faintest trace of a scent around the old den. Where had they all gone?

For several nights he ranged the woods, wild with unsatisfied longing. At dusk he would mount his calling-rock and bark. His shrill yap would carry far in the first still hush that precedes the coming night. Any unmated female within sound of his call would work in his direction; later he would pick up her track and after a brief preliminary flirtation, all would be well. Soon all his impassibility melted away before the keen edge of his disappointment and he was as wildly amorous as he was the first year after his puppyhood.

One morning, just before dawn, he heard, far off across the river, the excited babble of a running pack. Many of them, and in full cry. He remembered the pack that had pursued Old Vixen—they must be the same. Silence. Then, clear-cut, the round bell-notes that he had heard in the early Winter. Then, the long complaining O-o-o of the running-mate. He heard the quick clatter of the pack as they broke to them. Those two were old leaders—foes to be reckoned with for the others had gone to them at the first cry.

Blaze Face loved to listen to the bell on the little church at Mt. Moria. There was something soothing, in its cadence, to his vulpine ideas of harmony. The never-ceasing Bing-bong, Bing-bong, of the old lead hound was like it—pleasant to his ear. Some night he would work closer to the drive and see what the old fellow looked like; but the O-o-o-o, of his team mate was distasteful; it made the hair on his back stand erect. Well, they were across the river, he had other business and soon the incident was forgotten.

The next night he discovered a drift in the river and crossed over for the first time. There were no bridges and seldom any drifts and he had always stayed on his own side. He dreaded the swirl of the water underneath the logs but the spring-time loneliness was on him and he took the chance. Disappointment again. As far east as the railroad track and not a sign.

On his way home his keen sense of smell led him down a path into a ravine. Cautiously, with alert ears and twitching nostrils, he worked his way to the foot of a leaning tree. His eyes, ears, every scent and imprint in the dank mold of the little nook cried out their tale. The mild sun and gentle breeze that filtered its way into this sheltered spot had failed to obliterate the traces of last night's grim tragedy. Here a young fox, a vixen, had met her death. Hard-pressed she had taken to the leaning tree, and when the hunters had approached had leaped far off, down the hill, only to be caught after a few swift bounds.

Torn sod, blood, broken twigs; and scattered over quite a space. It was a large pack and they had worried her body before the hunters had reached the spot to claim her brush. Here was the story, written plainly on the book of nature, blatant to his senses.

Here one had died, but what had befallen all the rest? There are certain limitations to the animal mind. Even his shrewd old brain could not fathom it.

Blaze Face worked his way across the whispering waters to his den, and rested through the day. That night he mounted his rock again and called. As usual there was no response—he did not expect one. Females are shy; they love to be pursued. If there was one within sound of his bark, that was susceptible to the gentle voice of nature, she would linger near until she knew that he was cognizant of her presence, then coyly retreat, making sure all the time that he would follow.

No result! He then made a half-circle that brought him to the river-bank again. Not the faintest trace. His love call was absolutely barren of results.

Well, there was nothing left for him but to move up the Little Red to the home of the grays again. How he despised them—silly, slow-running fools. Still, they were his cousins; distant ones, of course, but one of them would do. He remembered one soft little thing that he had almost admired. After his litter was half-grown he could desert them. That would be the usual method of procedure in a case like this. Children of a misalliance are soon forgotten.

But, stay! He had not visited the Bee

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Rock neighborhood. True, he did not like it there; it was too close to town. The nauseous scent of man was in the atmosphere; but as a last resort, before consorting with the grays, he headed south.

The moon was a cold ball of radiance, riding high, above the tree-tops. The air was just warm enough to carry every little scent across the open spaces.

He would skirt the wood pastures, the old rail fences, and work his way, carefully, across the few scattered farms, but it was dangerous ground.

He crossed the little valley without incident, but at the next settlement some house-dogs barked. He had no fear of them, but it meant delay until they would quiet down so he bore to the west, toward the deserted settlements around Griffin Springs.

All quiet in the lonely houses, but as he crossed the next hill he heard a running dog, down toward the rock. A rabbit-dog, perhaps? He would investigate. Slowly he worked down the ridge. More sounds, more pungent scents welled up from the valley.

The woods were full of dogs! He could sense them in every direction. He must work his way back—must retrace his steps. He had seldom traveled this road before and it would never do to be started in strange territory. Once back in his old ranging-ground he could take advantage of every barrier that nature had built to help him to hamper his pursuers.

He turned, but almost on him, between the next wood pasture and the hill, the clear bell notes of the old trail dog rent the air. How they rolled in endless sequence from his throat—Bing-bong, Bing-bong, Bing-bong: Old Ranter! And hot upon his heels, O-o, O-o, O-o: Old Blue!

A young fox would have gone into a flurry, right there, for pandemonium leaped out of the night to smother him. He could hear the young dogs coming from every side but one. Up the draw—from the river—over the hill from the farm to the north—even from the west of him. They must have followed up the river-bank and branched up the creek. He was almost surrounded. They would have been cold trailing him soon, in any event.

To cross the farm to the north meant a terrific race with slender chance of winning through. South was Gin Creek, running east to the river. He would follow it down, between Searcy and the rock, until he struck the river-bank—then head for home.

UP ON Bee Rock the two old nighthawks were wild with excitement. At first John was pessimistic.

"Uncle Mose," he disgustedly exclaimed, "those fool hounds are running a dog: they are headed right straight for town."

The old man was obdurate.

"Nossir, nossir. Ma'sr John, dat er fox—an ole one, too! He's er gwine to swing roun' right under dis here rock. Ole Ranter an' Ole Blue started him. Yo' knows dey won't run nuffin else when we out arter fox. He er smart ole feller; he done been cotch 'tween de farm lan's an' town. He know de only way he can git back to de ruff groun' is right er roun' dis rock. We gwine ter see him. He gwine ter pass right down here below us. Hit's de only way to git norf an' dat's where he a goin'! Nuffin gwine ter stop him. If we went down dar ter het him off, he run right 'tween our laigs."

The old man was right. At the mouth of Gin Creek, just above the ferry, Blaze Face swung up-stream. They expected to see him break cover from the clump of hackberries and cross the open space before the hounds showed in the clearing. Not so. Trail, the big Redbone, and Lead, the spotted Walker, had been close at hand when Ranter opened and broke for him at the first sound. The others knew that Ranter and Blue would never speak on anything but a fox track. They lay back their ears and raced to overtake them. Not one of them tried to trail—but cut corners, and all broke from the fringe of trees in a storm-cloud of melody.

On the rock above, the aristocrat and the old darkey clung to each other and screamed. John was unemotional by nature. He was used to stirring scenes, but this was a different proposition. Before his eyes unfolded a tragedy, vital and real, and staged with every known accessory to stir the blood. His voice boomed out a cheer of encouragement to the dogs and every primal instinct of his being thrilled with the excitement of the moment.

Uncle Mose fairly danced. The negro character quickly responds to each passing emotion and for a short period of intense excitement he was rendered almost inarticulate. Cavorting wildly and nearly losing

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his balance on the rock, he finally managed to splutter out:

"Ma'sr John—Ma'sr John; did yo' see dat ole white face? Dat's him—dat's Ole Blaze Face dey say cain't be kotched. He come down here to cote' some ob dem lady foxes we already got. Now we gwine ter git him!"

Blaze Face turned at the first shallow brook. He had gone through a friendly crack in a rail-fence, and it had given him a few moments of time. With a few swift bounds he leaped from stone to stone, in the center of the stream, as far as he could go without touching ground, then climbing up the bank he ran to a little knoll and waited.

Trail, Lead and the young dogs splashed pell-mell, across the brook, to pause in perplexity at the vanished trail—then whining, scatter through the woods in search of it.

Good! It would halt them for a while, not long of course; the strategy was too simple. Almost instantly he heard the drawling song of Old Blue, followed by the never ceasing Bing-bong of his companion. Those two had not been fooled for a moment. It was doubtful if both had even crossed the brook. They had turned to the left and spread wide and Old Blue had caught his track where he had scrambled up the bank. The rest doubled back and were soon in full cry behind him. They had responded instantly to the old dogs' first call. Well, it left the road clear up the river and he was off.

Up in the first broken ground 'Possum Creek and Noisy Run empty into the Little Red about a mile apart. The source of both was from a series of cold water springs about three miles to the west. The two tiny rivulets start on their journey to the sea, divided only by a narrow ledge of broken flint; later they spread, leaving a fair-sized tableland, almost level, heavily wooded and of considerable extent between them. The lay of the country was ideal for the pursued. He could take up one of the streams to its source, cross the ridge, follow down to the river and repeat; or else, for variety, up any of the small gullies to the crest, circle and double back and thus reverse his direction. This was governed largely by circumstances—the direction of the wind and the location of the hunters.

While this course suited the fox, at the same time it was the Elysium of the hunters. By riding, or even walking, back and forth across the plateau they would be at all times within hearing of the chase. It was even possible, when the moon was full, to see the fox several times in the course of the night; but as Uncle Mose had once said—

"Ma'sr John, hits all right for us; hits all right for Br'er Fox, but it's sholy —— on dem dogs' feet."

It was a foregone conclusion that Blaze Face would tarry awhile when he reached this place. The sharp rocks would lame his pursuers. There were many strategic points that could be used to camouflage his trail. He had recovered from his momentary perturbation. After all it was a break in the monotony of existence—in the end he would emerge triumphant as before.

First, he would tear the heart out of this blithering gang behind him with a burst of speed and then deride them from the hillside while they nursed their bruised and battered paws, or came to fresh grief upon the jagged paths he knew so well. The night was young, the swelling pæan of the clan behind would sink into a wail of discontent before the morning dawned.

KNOWLEDGE born of instinct and ripened by years of experience told the old fox the best course that lay open to him. In every pack there was some element of weakness; it was for him to discover it, if he would outwit them. With a mixed lot behind him, a burst of speed would soon have them separated; then, without recognized leaders, they would be in a hopeless muddle.

Fast dogs were easily fooled. They would run ahead of the trail at every turn—they had bad noses. When the trail was cold, a scampering rabbit would sometimes draw them off. This was almost always true with youngsters. Of course they might be called back, but it had grown colder—an advantage had been gained.

About the only race that had ever worried him was when two strange brindle hounds had wandered into the hills one night and struck his track. They belonged to an old man in bad health, who lived down at the ferry. They were deer-dogs, who tiring of inaction, and failing to coax their master forth, had started out on their own account and struck his trail cold.

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He heard them from the first, but had contemptuously failed to heed so small a pack. The first thing that he knew they were running hot behind him. They were big, strong fellows, eager and true of nose. He could outrun, but he could not distance them. They clung to his track for hours and were only thrown off by a complicated trick. They were deer-dogs—used to running with heads up; with more experience on fox, it might have been a different story.

Well, here they come! First he would make it a test of speed and see how well they clung together. He would make some big circles and observe them from the hill. He would study them as they passed beneath.

The grand old fox was never in better condition. He had entirely recovered from the effects of the poison. Well-fed but not burdened with a superfluity of flesh; the last few weeks of nocturnal rambles in search of a wife, had left him in perfect fettle, so he started off with that long, rolling, space-devouring gallop, that ate up the distance at every bound.

First he would travel without undue haste—just place a comfortable margin between himself and his enemies—enough to keep their noses to the ground all the time. A few miles to the north across some farms thick-studded with worm-fences, to the west, then back again to the river, to play for a while between the two creeks.

In an hour he was back again. The never-ceasing clamor behind him had not diminished. They were in a solid mass and still close together. Well, he would see what those fellows looked like. He doubled back, this time along the hillside. He could now observe them as they passed in the valley beneath. Dropping down, for a short rest, about half-way up the hill, he heard voices on the plateau above him. It was the crowd that had arrived from town, much to the disgust of John and Uncle Mose.

The pack—full crowd—passed a short distance below; their baying fairly made the hill tremble. He was dismayed to see them all so close together. It seemed that the valley was full of them, all well bunched but two. Not far back, and running breast to breast, one each side of the trail, was a big dark red hound, and a small, but rangy blue. The big dog gave tongue continuously. At every leap his deep voice boomed like the church bell at Mt. Moria. The blue spoke only now and then, and in a long-drawn, quavering, irritating wail that was maddening.

Blaze Face slunk down the hill as soon as they had passed. Just before his old trail branched off, leading upward toward the crest, was a small swamp rank grown with creepers—full of rotting logs and cypress knees. He spent precious moments racing from one end of the swamp to the other, aimlessly, it would appear, to a chance observer; but his object was to confuse by the very pungency of the effluvium that he exhaled; then running the long trunk of a fallen sycamore he sprang far off and headed for the hills again.

He heard them raging through the swamp, then some of the younger dogs broke away over the old trail and the rest followed in a body.

Good! He had outwitted them at last. But no! O-o, O-o, Bing-bong, Bing-bong; the long-drawn wail of the little blue, and the quick boom of the big red again. He had delayed them only for a moment. But strangest of all the pack dropped the old trail and surged back into the valley again and were soon in full song after him.

So far, Blaze Face was feeling strong, but he was uneasy. In the old days he could have secured a rest by a simple course of action. All that was necessary was to cross the trail of some other fox and leave it to draw the pack. Many times, in the past, Old Vixen and himself had taken turns when the chase drew too near the den where their young litter lay.

One of them would take the dogs on a long journey into the distance, while the other provided for the young. If too hard pressed they would return to the neighborhood, speed up until well ahead, then the mate would cross, in sight of the dogs, and lure them off again. Now there was no fox to trade trails with; although he did not know it, this new pack had accounted for them all. Farther up the river was the home of the grays. It would be an easy matter to switch the chase to one of them; besides, there were many rocky paths between—he would, perhaps, lose some of his pursuers on the way. Day had come and the strain of his long run was beginning to tell.

Not far from Noisy Run was a small bluff along whose side ran a narrow shelf that could be reached, from the south, only by

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climbing a leaning tree. From there he could work himself along the ledge to level ground again. It was almost certain that the dogs would come to a stand at the foot of the tree, and his subterfuge would not be discovered until the hunters came.

John heard the dogs bark treed, and called out—

"They've got him—they've put him up!" But the old darkey would not be convinced.

"Nossir—Nossir, Ma'sr John," he contended. "Yo' ain't heered Ole Ranter. Yo' ain't heered Ole Blue. Dat Ole White Face may fool yo' Walkers an' yo' Birdsingers, but he cain't fool dem ole houn's ob mine. Dem old rascals jess set down on dere tails and *talk* if he was dere. Dar now —listen dar! Dar dey go now; dey's made a big circle an pick him up again."

The prize strategy that had always proved so potent for Blaze Face had failed, so he struck off for the wild lands where the grays had been so plentiful. Taking every rough path that lay in his way, over the sharpest rocks, through the deep thickets where tangled vine and saw-briar would lacerate the tender hide of his smooth-coated followers, he sped in desperate haste.

No effort at evasion now; those two old architects of his destiny had unraveled every problem that he had placed before them. Now he would offer as a pawn the life of one of his gray cousins. This was his only hope. He could not shake the two old dogs—he could not outrun the rest. Separated, either faction might be thwarted—combined, they were invulnerable.

The big gray that denned at the foot of the blasted white oak up above Lem Tolliver's still, heard an unusual commotion rolling down the valley. Full of curiosity, he left the rock, on which he was taking his sun-bath, to investigate. Before his slow wits could grasp the situation a very tired red fox had passed him and disappeared, and he found himself surrounded by a sea of dogs. They seemed to pile into his quiet gulley in endless numbers—they poured over the bank in a deluge. A thousand obscene tongues reviled him; countless red caverns opened to engulf him and myriad rows of gleaming teeth were charging down to rend him.

For once in his life, the big gray was the concentrated essence of action. He tore down the hill, right through Tolliver's pig-pen, and across the yard, upsetting three goslings and an embryo moonshiner, who was sleeping in his cradle under a peach-tree, and was on his way.

Mrs. Letty Tolliver could only gasp—

"For land sakes, what's happened?" To this day she has never figured it out.

THE BIG GRAY did his best. Perhaps no gray in Arkansas ever traveled so far and fast in so short a period. He was so frightened that he did not even try to figure out his directions. He was smart too—for a gray—but the little wit that he did possess went blithering at the beginning of that first mad rush. All the fiends of earth, air and heaven had assailed him. It was too much for a peaceful fox to endure, and preserve his mental equilibrium, so he just ran —ran—ran till they pulled him down.

After having worried his poor broken body for the matter of thirty minutes or so, seventeen tired but proud and happy Walker and Birdsong foxhounds, the property of Mr. John Holland of Searcy, Arkansas, started home. A little after noon they heard their owner's horn and went to him. All were accounted for but two—Old Ranter and Old Blue! John was worn out. He was satisfied that his dogs had caught Old Blaze Face; there was blood and marks of the fray on their coats. He reasoned that Old Ranter and Blue had been distanced and would show up at home before night, if they were not already there.

Nothing like that could convince Uncle Mose.

"I knows dem, Ma'sr John; dey's still runnin' dat fox, and dey's gwine ter hang on ter him. Dis is his home, and dey sho' gwine ter bring him back if dey done get him fust. To' go an' get yo' sleep, I gwine ter be here to take care ob dem when dey come."

Blaze Face had witnessed the triumph of his strategy. His tormentors were effectually disposed of. He would work his way, by slow stages, farther into the hills; the neighborhood of his old home was now forbidden ground.

He could not hope to weather many such trying ordeals in the future. Those old dogs could not be deceived even for a moment, now. They would figure out every artifice of his before he could execute it. They were too trail wise to be beguiled a second time. Now he could rest. Could lick the gripping pains out of his tortured limbs.

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Could ease his bursting lungs with gentle respirations.

But what was that? He was on his feet again. Just over the hill— Bing-bong, Bing-bong, O-o!

The two old dogs had been left far behind, but still forged on. More dangerous now than all the rest for the lore of many trails had made them wise. And he—he—was far gone. The terrific pace that he had been forced to make to hold his own ahead of the raging pack had taken its assessment of vitality.

His pursuers had not hurried; they had not wasted one atom of energy. Depending one upon the other, they had not consumed their stamina by a single useless step. Where the pack had jumped Big Gray they never hesitated for an instant. Old Ranter paused, for a moment, in his monotonous chant, but as Old Blue turned to the left he followed and caught the scent again.

From then on Blaze Face lived through a Hell of a thousand years. All through that long hot day of fear and grinding misery he labored on. Sometimes by a burst of speed or cunning plot, he would gain a moment's respite, but the delay would not refresh him; he would stiffen in the legs at the first few moments of inaction. He would leap, run or roll without apparent reason, seemingly using up much needed vitality in aimless exercise; but it was necessary to keep his blood in circulation—to hold back the numb feeling creeping up his limbs.

Off on a long run through the woods he reached Mt. Pisgah. High up he worked his way until he came to where the winds swept ceaselessly across the rocks. Almost a mile of this, through a region of scant herbage; only a few scrub oaks, keeping well upon the barren spots, he toiled. The sweeping wind would whip away the last vestige of a scent and whirl it into space.

Still that never ceasing bay. The dogs were far behind but coming steadily. He reached the end of the ridge and nothing remained but to take to the woods again.

Toward the west was an unknown country. East again meant home. Oh, if he could only reach his old den in the grottoes of Salt Creek! There, at last, was rest! Far back in the natural caverns, where no dog had ever penetrated, were cool waters, soft leaves, that had been his bed for many years.

There he had been born—there rolled a fluffy ball of rusty fur upon the cavern floor. All his litter mates were gone. Some long years before. He was the last—perhaps the last of his kind in all the world. But now he was going home—home, that was the haven of the weary soul, the wrecked and broken body. Red mists swam before his eyes. From time to time he would lapse into unconsciousness, while still struggling on. The dogs were nearer now. They had gained when they reached the damp shadows of the woods. Full cry, they came—Bing-bong, Bing-bong, O-o!

Hope again! There directly in his path, a forest fire had shortly raged. Trees and stumps were still smoking. Soft ashes lay thick upon the ground. The dust would clog the nostrils of the trailing hounds. It was even better than a driving rain. Now for a burst of speed and safety! For a mile he ran, deaf to every thought or sound. Blindly, unconsciously, until he had crossed the fire-burned patch, then paused to listen. Close in now, weak, ash-choked, but still incessant, he heard the sing song of those fiends behind him— Bing-bong, Bing-bong, O-o!

LATE that evening the old negro, waiting on the hill, heard a feeble bay from the west. Wild with excitement, he hurried toward the sound. A big red fox was coming, with faltering steps, across an uncultivated field. Now falling, striving to his feet again, slowly and painfully coming home!

Behind him two weary dogs lurched on. First one, then the other, would go down, then stagger to his feet again, but coming—coming all the time. At the rail fence, next the woods, the fox found a crack and struggled through. It was his last feeble effort; he lay there for a moment, then essayed to rise, but nature had run its course. That was the end!

The weary dogs reached the fence, but could not cross. They leaned against the rails, and weakly barked, "Treed."

As the old negro bent over the dying fox he felt a qualm of pity, mixed with a world of pride. He was given to scriptural quotations—generally incorrect—

"Ole feller," he said, "yo' sholy have run yo' last race. Dem dat libs by de teef by de teef mus' perish!"

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THE PATHLESS TRAIL*

A FOUR-PART STORY
—PART THREE—

By ARTHUR O. FRIEL

Author of "Wild Women," "The Bouto," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form.

THREE ex-Army men, Roderick McKay, Meredith Knowlton and Timothy Ryan, arrived in Brazil to undertake a hazardous search for a certain David Dawson Rand. There had been a report that the man they were looking for was held captive by a tribe of cannibals called the Red Bones.

The result of various inquiries in the town of Remate de Males—where they had landed—made them decide to start at once up the river Javary for the Interior. They set about their preparations, and enlisted the aid of the *superintendente* of the town and also of a Herr Schwandorf who was said to know the country well.

From the beginning the behavior of the German was peculiar, and the three Americans were put on their guard. He secured a boat for them, however, and Peruvian paddlers—with whom it soon appeared they would have trouble.

After an uneventful trip of fifteen days the party met a canoe manned by Brazilian rubber-workers. At once a quarrel sprang up between the crews of the two boats, and Knowlton came to blows with Francisco, one of his paddlers, before it could be stopped.

Several nights later while the camp slept, Francisco, knife in hand, attempted to murder Knowlton. The assailant was caught in time; but immediately a general fight with the Peruvians broke out. Only Jose, the *puntero*, remained faithful.

Meantime, back in Iquitos, Schwandorf telegraphed to the American agents of the searching expedition that its members had all been murdered.

The three men from the north resumed their journey and presently reached a Brazilian settlement, the *seringal* of Coronel Nunes. There they were well received, although the enmity between Jose and their hosts caused much embarrassment. The *coronel* entertained his new friends, and they related the circumstances of their trip to him. When the account was done the double dealing of Schwandorf became amazingly clear; and Jose, for one, swearing vengeance, started back at once for Remate de Males.

After a stay of several days, the Americans decided to push on. They secured from the *coronel* the services of two of his best men, and were given information regarding the difficulties to come. The party then continued on up the river until they arrived at a place where the guides said that they had once seen the Raposa—a native name for the wild-man thought to be the missing Rand. Here they all landed. The plan was to visit a tribe of Mayorunas and to make friends with them if possible. In this way it was believed something could be learned of the Raposa.

By the efforts of their two Brazilians the searchers located several savages who agreed to take the strangers to their chief. The journey now promised to be dangerous, for the warriors were very hostile and might at any time prove treacherous. By accident one of them, through his own carelessness, was wounded by a poisoned arrow. McKay, having some medical knowledge, quickly undertook to save his life. The experiment was successful and resulted in great good fortune for the expedition—as was soon shown.

CHAPTER XV

THE CANNIBALS

THROUGH the long dim shadows of early morning the little column passed on the last leg of its journey to the *maloca* of Suba, chief of this outlying tribe of the Mayorunas. At its head marched Yuara, his left arm encased in bandages, his face drawn and pallid, his stride stiff and springless, but still carrying his weapons and stoically setting the pace as befitted the son of a sub-chief. He had had no sleep; he had lain at the gates of death; his arm ached cruelly; yet a warm glow shone in his hollow eyes as he reflected on the fact that in all the unwritten history of his people he was

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the first man to survive the inexorable power of the *wourali*. As long as he lived this fact would lift him above the level of all his fellows. Even the chief could not boast of such a superhuman feat.

The undergrowth this morning was not so thick as it had been, and the machetes of Lourenço and Pedro stayed in their sheaths. The ground, too, was more level and the footing more firm. After some three hours of walking the Americans found that they had come into a faint path.

Somewhat to the bewilderment of the white men, who expected the Indians to increase their speed now that the way home lay under their feet, the leading pair slowed their gait. Moreover, they scanned the trail with intent care and watched the trees along the way. At length, with a warning grunt, Yuara stepped out of the path and began a detour. His comrade and the Brazilians followed. The Americans stopped.

"What's the idea?" demanded McKay, looking along the innocent-appearing path.

"Probably a man-trap, *capitao*," answered Pedro. "Follow us."

"Let's see the trap first."

Lourenço called to Yuara, who stopped and grunted two words.

"*Si*, it is a trap. A pit, Yuara says."

Yuara spoke again and Lourenço added:

"He says we must not touch it. It is there just before you, covered so cunningly that it looks exactly like the rest of the ground. The cover is a framework of sticks balanced on a pole and the instant a man steps on it it gives way. He falls into a nine-foot hole whose sides are dug inward, so that they overhang above him. There the cannibals find him and kill him. I fell into one of those holes when I first came into this Mayoruna country, so I know just how they are made."

"So? How did you get out?"

"There were two of us, and I stood on the other man's shoulders while he lifted me high enough to jump out. Then I tied bush-rope to a tree and he climbed up the rope. Come. Yuara waits."

After a short circuit around the danger-point the party returned to the path, and as they went on Lourenço explained further concerning the pit.

"Every approach to the *malocas* has this kind of trap hidden in it, and others also. The Indians recognize the places by some secret signal known only to themselves—a certain kind of stick or vine or something of the kind, placed where it can be seen by those who understand. The traps are made to stop any enemies who try to sneak up on the *malocas* and catch these people unawares. Another kind of trap is a spring-bow or a blow-gun shot by a vine stretched across the path. Still another is a piece of ground studded with poisoned *araya* bones which pierce the bare feet of any one walking on them. It is well for us that we now have friendly guides."

"Quite so," McKay agreed dryly.

Some distance farther on the leader again left the path, and this time all filed after him without comment. Pedro pointed significantly at a thin, tight-drawn bush-cord stretched across the path at the height of a man's ankle; the trigger which would discharge hidden death at anything touching it. At another point perhaps a hundred feet farther along a third and last detour was made, and this time the nature of the trap was not revealed by anything on the ground. No questions were asked.

With the passing of these three menaces Yuara resumed his former pace and abandoned his circumspection. Before long came sounds of communal life—the barking of a dog and shouts of children. Then suddenly the forest thinned and after a few more strides the marchers found themselves in a clearing.

Before them rose a big round house, about forty feet high and a hundred feet in diameter, its sides composed of palm-logs and its roof a thick thatch of palm-leaves whence smoke oozed lazily through an opening at the peak. A single low door, not more than four feet high, opened toward a creek a few rods away at the right. Near this doorway a couple of naked children, boy and girl, were playing with the dog, while beyond them a number of women, also nude, were busy at some kind of work.

As Yuara and his fellow tribesmen entered the open space the boy shouted a greeting and started running toward them. Then, seeing the white men filing from the bush behind the warriors, the youngster stood as if shocked motionless. After one long stare he screamed and bolted for the shelter of the *maloca*. Other screams echoed his as the women also saw the outlanders. They too dived through the doorway.

Out from behind the house leaped three warriors, two of whom already had fitted

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arrows to their bows, while the third—a powerful fellow—clutched a four-foot war-club. Weapons raised, faces contracted into fighting masks, they stared speechless at the spectacle of the sub-chief's son calmly leading gun-bearing whites among them.

Knowlton, though his attention was riveted on the astonished warriors, caught the quiet snick of Tim's safe-lock being turned off.

"None of that, Tim!" he warned. "Put that safety on again. And don't hold your gun as if you intended to use it."

"Aw, I was jest tryin' her to make sure she was all right."

"Put it on!" snapped the lieutenant. Another tiny click told him the order was obeyed.

OUT from the doorway darted another warrior, stooping low to avoid hitting his head. Others followed instantly, all armed and ready for action. The opening was still vomiting tribesmen when Yuara and the rest reached it. But none made a hostile move when it was seen that the son of the sub-chief was in command and that the strangers seemed friendly. Yuara spoke, briefly but authoritatively, and the weapons sank. Then, with a word to his three companions, he ducked through the doorway. The other three remained where they were.

"We shall have to wait now, comrades, until Yuara tells his father and the chief about us," Lourenço said. "So let us take off our packs and rest."

He set the example by laying his rifle on the ground, unslinging his pack, squatting beside it, and coolly rolling a cigaret. Apparently he was paying no attention whatever to the savages, who watched his every move. But McKay, glancing at him as he followed suit, saw that for all his seeming unconcern the Brazilian bush-rover was keenly watchful, and that his gun lay within reach of his hand.

From within the tribal house sounded the monotonous voice of Yuara. After listening a moment Lourenço quietly addressed the nearest warrior. A slightly surprized look passed over the cannibal's face.

He replied, and a slow conversation ensued.

Meanwhile the others looked over the array of savage fighting men. Except for differences of stature, build and expression, they were as like as brothers. All were light-skinned—hardly darker than the river-tanned whites themselves; all had straight-set eyes, with no hint of the slant often found among the Indians of the Amazon head-waters; and the cheek-bones of all were fairly low. Their stature was a little under six feet and most of them had an athletic symmetry of physique. Their feet, McKay noticed, were small and shapely.

All wore tall feather head-dresses of parrot and *mutum* plumes. All had the scarlet and black rings around the eyes, the streaks from temple to chin; the wavy designs on their bodies. And each wore in the cartilage of his nose a pair of small feathers slanting outward. At another time and under other circumstances the white men might have smiled at those nose-feathers, which resembled odd mustaches; but as they studied the austere faces around them they found no occasion for merriment. Nor was the tension lessened by the sight of the weapons grasped in the strong hands of the warriors.

Great bows and arrows, such as the hunters had borne, were supplemented here by long clubs of heavy wood and by ugly spears. The clubs terminated in balls studded with jaguar-teeth. The spears were triple-pronged, each prong ending in a saw-toothed *araya* bone and each bone darkened by the fatal *wourali*. Frightful weapons they were, the one designed to smash skulls and tear out brains, the other to stab and poison at the same thrust.

Lourenço stopped talking, and the others observed that now the wild men stood more easily, their holds on their weapons loosened.

"I have shown them, *capitao*, that I can speak their tongue, and told them we go to visit the chief Monitaya as friends," he explained. "They tell me Monitaya has grown great since last I saw him. Another tribe which lost its chief and sub-chiefs by a swift sickness has joined his own, and he now rules two big *malocas* together. He is a powerful fighter and if he is friendly to us we have a good chance of success. Ah, here is Yuara."

The son of the sub-chief came through the doorway as he spoke, followed by an older man whose facial resemblance and ornaments indicated that he was the sub-chief himself. His head-gear was more elaborate than that of his men and around

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his shoulders and down his chest hung a brilliant feather-dress, while a wide belt of green, blue and black plumes encircled his hips. Yuara himself had inserted feathers in his nose and donned a head-band of tall parrot-plumes a trifle more ornate than those worn by the ordinary fighters, and somehow the simple additions seemed to transform him into a bigger, fiercer man. Also, his eyes now held a smoldering light which had not been there before.

The older man, Rana the sub-chief, glanced swiftly along the line of new faces. Then his gaze returned to McKay. His mouth set and his countenance turned hard. He spoke curtly to Yuara, who replied with one word. After another long, unpleasant look at McKay, who stared coldly back at him, Rana grunted a few words and reentered the house.

Lourenço, nonplused by the frigidity of the sub-chief where he had expected gratitude or at least hospitality, glanced questioningly at Yuara. But that young man stood mute, looking straight ahead.

"The sub-chief says we shall enter and see the chief. We must leave our guns outside."

"Don't like that," muttered McKay. "That sub-chief looks ugly."

"But we must obey or provoke a fight, *capitao*. Besides, our rifles would be useless inside, as they would be instantly seized if we lifted them. So let us make the best of it. But I think you can carry your pistols with you; they are covered by the holsters, and I do not believe these people know what they are. And since Rana spoke only of guns, we will all keep our machetes. Come."

"Wait a second."

McKay dived a hand into his haversack and brought forth a heavy hunting-knife with a gaudy red-and-white bone handle, sheathed and attached to a leather belt.

"Brought this along as a present for some Indian who might do us a good turn," he explained. "Been thinking of giving it to Yuara, but now I'll pass it to the chief. Might make a difference. Right, let's go."

With confident tread but with some misgiving the five advanced, leaving guns and packs on the ground. One by one they bent low and got through the doorway. Yuara, with a word to a clubman and a motion to the equipment, followed the whites. trailed in turn by his three companions of the forest. The clubman, after a curious inspection of the packs, stood on guard among them, his bludgeon grasped loosely but suggestively ready to prevent any undue inquisitiveness by the rest. But soon he found himself alone, for the other tribesmen transferred their attention and themselves to the interior of the *maloca*.

WITHIN the house the soldiers of fortune halted a moment, adjusting their vision to the sudden diminution of light. Except for the sunshine pouring in at the smoke-hole above and at the tiny door behind, the only light in the big room came from small cooking-fires scattered about the place, and for the moment details were withheld from the newcomers' sight. Then they found themselves in what seemed a labyrinth of poles and hammocks.

Through this confusion Yuara passed with familiar step, and in his wake the travelers went to a central fire around which was a comparatively clear space. Beyond, in a big hammock dyed with the symbolic scarlet and black and tasseled with many squirrel-tails, sat a fat, small-eyed, heavy-jawed man whose elaborate feather-dress and authoritative air proclaimed him chief. Beside him stood Rana and another sub-chief, lean and somber-faced. Behind this bulwark huddled the women and children, staring wide-eyed. As the visitors stopped and returned the chief's unwinking regard the warriors packed themselves at their backs, blocking all chance of exit.

When the shuffle of feet had died and no sound was audible, Yuara began to talk. In his deliberate way he told the complete narrative of his journey, which previously he had sketched only in outline. His three companions corroborated his tale from time to time by nods, and when the discovery of the slain hunter's bones was described one of those three stepped forward and laid the dead man's weapons on the ground before the chief. As Yuara went on he touched his bandaged arm and pointed to McKay and Knowlton. And as he concluded he motioned toward Lourenço.

Ignorant of the Indian language, but guessing the nature of his talk from his motions, the Americans stood patiently awaiting the next move. For a time all three of the chiefs remained silent; but all of them studied McKay, standing bolt upright

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with arms folded and the belt-wrapped knife partly concealed in the hollow of one elbow. Though it was evident that Yuara had given the captain full credit for saving his life, the faces of the head men showed no sign of friendliness. In fact, their expressions were distinctly ominous.

At length the chief turned his eyes to Lourenço. The veteran bushman promptly stepped forward and said his say. At the end he turned, took from McKay the knife, unrolled the belt, and dangled the weapon before the eyes of the rulers. They stared at it in obvious ignorance of its character. Not until the Brazilian drew the blade from its sheath and the glint of steel struck their vision did they show recognition. Then Chief Suba grunted, his little eyes lighted up and he reached for it.

For a few minutes he sat gloating over the gift, admiring the bone handle, hefting the weight of the long blade, while the sub-chiefs gazed in envy. When he looked up his face was beaming. But then the sour-faced sub-chief at his left hand muttered something and Suba's visage darkened. His eyes rested again on McKay, went to the bandaged arm of Yuara, dropped to his knife—the first steel knife ever owned by him or any man of the Suba tribe—and rose again to the black-bearded captain. Abruptly then he spoke out.

Lourenço stared in blank astonishment. After a puzzled moment he shook his head as if unable to believe he had heard aright. Suba, scowling, repeated what he had said. Lourenço shook his head again, this time in vehement denial, and began to talk. But Suba, rising with surprizing agility for a man of his weight, stopped him imperiously and spoke with finality. Slowly the Brazilian nodded and turned to his captain.

"I do not understand this, *capitao*. But these are the words of the chief:

" 'The white man with the black beard tries a trick, but it does not deceive the free men of the forest. The thing which he thinks to be hidden in his own heart is known to Suba and his chiefs. It is known also to the Chief Monitaya, and to his chiefs, and to his men also. The white man is bold. And now his own boldness shall be his death.

" 'Since the white man has said he goes to visit the Chief Monitaya, and since by some demon's power the white man has saved the life of Yuara, who is a man of Suba, the men of Suba will allow him to go in peace from this place. But Suba will see that he and his companions go to Monitaya, who will know how to deal with his visitors. The men of Suba will take the strangers at once to the canoes and carry them to Monitaya.

" 'If the white man of the black beard and the black mind thought the men of the jungle blind to the foulness he would do here, he is a fool. It is useless for him or his men to lie and say they know not what Suba means. Let him look into his own heart and he will know well.

" 'Suba has spoken.'

"Something is wrong, *capitao*, but I do not know what it is. It will do no good to argue. Let us go at once."

Suba snarled commands to the warriors. They trooped toward the door. Without another word or glance at the three chiefs Lourenço stalked after the Indians and his comrades followed with stiff dignity.

Outside the savages picked up the rifles and packs and carried them to the creek, where small canoes lay. The five strangers were allowed to crowd themselves together in a four-man canoe, but their guns and packs were distributed among four other dugouts, into which armed paddlers entered. Other Indians brought provisions to the outgoing craft. In a very short time the leading canoe started off down-stream, followed by the boat of the white men, behind which the other craft pressed closely.

They swung in among the trees, and the *maloca* of Suba was blotted out.

CHAPTER XVI

BLACKBEARD

"WELL," said Knowlton, after a period of silent paddling, "we have met the enemy and we are hisn. No harm done so far, though, and if old man Calisaya, or whatever his name is, wants to act nasty we can send him and a few others along the road to glory with our gats. We'll travel the same road, of course, but we'll take company with us."

"*Si, senhor*," Pedro agreed. "And besides your pistols, we still have our machetes. Yet I believe Lourenço's words to the chief Monitaya will make all well. But I can not help wondering—" he glanced at McKay.

"I'm wondering too, Pedro," said the

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captain. "It's hardly possible that these people know why we're here, and hardly likely that they have any interest in the Raposa. Lord knows I've nothing else up my sleeve. It's a riddle to me."

It remained a riddle to the rest, for no explanation could be gleaned from the Mayorunas. At the first halt, which did not come until nearly sundown, the Americans discovered that one of the men in the fore canoe was Yuara, who had been lying in the bottom of the craft and sleeping all the afternoon. From him Lourenço attempted to get information as to the reason for Suba's enmity—but in vain. The tall fellow spoke not a word in reply and his face remained unreadable.

Camp was made, and by Yuara's direction the packs of the adventurers were restored to them. The rifles, however, remained under guard of savages appointed by the sub-chief's son. When the night meal was out of the way nothing remained but to seek the hammocks and sleep, for further attempts at conversation by Lourenço met with the same silent rebuff from every cannibal addressed. None showed active hostility by either look or manner, but it was plain that between wild and civilized men stood a wall—a wall not too high for the jungle-dwellers to leap over in deadly action if occasion should be given. Wherefore the whites held themselves aloof.

"I am glad Yuara is with us," Lourenço said. "As he promised, he does not forget what was done for him. He will keep this band in control, and unless I am much mistaken he will tell Monitaya all he knows of us, which surely will not do us any harm. At any rate, we can sleep in safety tonight. And since it does no good to puzzle about what is gone by or to worry about what has not yet come to pass, let us sleep now."

"Ho-hum!" yawned Tim. "Renzo, ye spill more solid sense to the square inch than any feller I seen in a long time. We're here because we're here, today's dead and tomorrer ain't born yet, and li'l Timmy Ryan hits the hay right now. Night, gents."

So, surrounded by man-eaters, the trailers of the Raposa slept far more securely than on any night down the river, when their companions had been supposedly civilized Peruvians. Whether a watch was kept by their guards during the night they neither knew nor cared, since they had no intention of attempting escape.

They awoke to find the men of Suba diminished in number by half. Yuara, deigning to speak for the first time since leaving the *maloca*, explained that the absent men had gone hunting for their breakfasts. Before long the hunters came straggling back, bearing monkeys and birds which were divided among their companions. None of this meat was offered to the prisoners, who ate unconcernedly from their pack-rations. Tim, after watching the Indians sink sharp-filed teeth into broiled monkey-haunches and tear the meat from the bones, snorted and turned his back to them.

"Look like a gang o' bloody-faced devils gobblin' babies," he muttered. "I'll believe now they're cannibals, all right."

So uncomfortably apt was his simile that the others grimaced and turned their eyes elsewhere until the savage meal was finished. Then their attention became riveted on a queer proceeding at the canoe wherein Yuara had journeyed yesterday.

To the gunwales amidships two of the men fastened a couple of small crotched posts. In the forks was laid a pole, crosswise of the boat, and from this, by slender fiber-cords, four slabs of wood were hung. Strolling down to the canoe, the travelers found that athwart its bottom had been laid a cross-piece supporting two shorter crotched posts, between which stretched another transverse pole; and from this pole in turn the lower ends of the four slabs had been suspended. Now the savages joined the tips of each pair of slabs by carved end-sections, and the contrivance seemed to be complete—a sort of grate, its bars sloping at an angle of forty-five degrees.

As the Americans eyed the arrangement in perplexity, one of the crew picked up from the bow of the canoe a pair of mallets, the heads of which were wrapped in hide. With these he struck the slabs in rapid succession. Out rolled four notes of astonishing volume—the first four notes of the musical scale. Again and again he ran them over, then stopped. The deep tones thrummed away along the creek and died.

"By George, a big xylophone!" Knowlton exclaimed admiringly.

"It sure talks right out loud," said Tim. "Lots o' class to these guys, at that. Bet this is their brass band, and we'll go rip-snortin' into the next town like we was on parade. Oughter have some flags to hang

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up in the boats, and mebbe a drum-corpse to help out. Wisht I had a tin whistle or somethin', and I'd join the orchestra. I can toot a whistle fine."

"My favorite instrument is the old-fashioned dinner-horn," laughed Knowlton. "But I think you're wrong—this is some kind of signaling apparatus."

"You have it right, *senhor*," Lourenço affirmed. "I have heard this sort of thing used, though I never before saw the instrument itself. Those notes will carry for at least five miles, and the cannibals send messages by striking the bars in different order. This run which we have just heard is always used first, and no message is sent until a reply is received."

"Bush telegraph," nodded McKay. "First call your operator and then shoot the message in code. Pretty ingenious for a bunch of absolute savages."

Lourenço turned to Yuara and asked a question. Yuara curtly replied.

"He says, *capitao*, that this is to tell Monitaya we come. But we are too far off for Monitaya's men to hear. The bars are made ready before starting so that they can be used as soon as we are within hearing. He also says that we start now."

THE Mayorunas already were entering their canoes. With cool deliberation the whites gathered up their equipment and settled themselves for the journey at whose end lay either life or death. The boat of Yuara started, and once more the flotilla was on its way.

For an hour or more it swung on among the forested hills before the telegraph instrument was put to use. Then it paused and the sonorous voice of the xylophone spoke to the jungle. A period of waiting brought no reply.

The canoes moved on for a mile. Again the mallets beat the wood in the ascending scale of the call. And then, faint, mellow, far off, sounded the answer.

While every man sat silent the bars boomed out their fateful news. Slow, brief, deep as a bell tolling a dirge, a reply rolled back. And with the solemnity of a funeral cortège the canoes once more moved on, unhurried, inexorable, the measured swing of the paddles beating like a pulse of doom.

At length the crew of Yuara held their paddles. Yuara himself turned toward the second canoe and talked a minute. A signal to his men, and his boat proceeded. All the others remained where they were.

"He goes to Monitaya to speak of us," said Lourenço. "He will return. We have only to wait."

"Yeah," grunted Tim disgustedly. "We'll wait till night if he takes as long to go through his rigmarole as he done yesterday. If I got to fight I want to hop to it, not set round in the shade o' the shelterin' palm while them guys are heatin' up the stew-pot. This waitin' stuff gits my goat."

"You might sing us a song, *senhor*, to pass the time," Pedro suggested with a tight-lipped smile.

"Say, I'll do that, jest to show these guys I don't give a rip. And while their ears are dazzled by me melody I'm goin' to git me holster unbuttoned and me masheet kinder limbered up. Git set. Here it comes:

"Ol' Hindyburg thought he was swell,
Pa-a-arley-voo!
He made the kids in Belgium yell,
Pa-a-arley-voo!
But the Yanks come over with shot and shell
And Hindyburg he run like ——,
Rinky-dinky—parley—voo!"

Under cover of his outbreak, which made the savages clutch their weapons and glare at him in mingled suspicion and amazement, there proceeded a furtive loosening of pistols and machetes.

"A noble sentiment, and more or less appropriate," grinned Knowlton. "But don't give them another spasm for a few minutes, or they may rise up and kill us all in self-defense. They're on the ragged edge now."

"Aw, them guys dunno how to appreciate good singin'. But I should worry—I got me gat fixed now like I want it."

Time dragged past. The Americans and Brazilians smoked and exchanged casual comments on subjects far removed from their present environment. The Mayorunas watched them with unceasing vigilance, as if expecting a sudden break for life and liberty. Their chief had intimated that Monitaya would kill these men; and now was their last chance to try to dodge death. But neither black-bearded McKay nor any of his mates manifested the slightest concern. And at last the canoe of Yuara came back.

It came, however, without Yuara himself. The son of Rana had remained at

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the *malocas* ahead, whence he sent the command to advance. Closely hemmed in by the men of Suba, the white men's boat surged onward at a brisk pace. Around a bend in the creek it went, and at once the domain of Monitaya leaped into view.

Two big tribal houses, each considerably larger than the one of Suba, rose pompously in a wide cleared space beside the stream. Before them, ranged in a semicircle, stood hundreds of Mayorunas—men, women, children, all silently watching the canoes of the newcomers. In the center of the arc, like the hub of a human half-wheel, a small knot of men waited in aloof dignity—four of them, adorned with the ornate feather-dress of sub-chiefs, backed by a dozen tall, muscular savages each armed with a huge war-club.

Before all stood a powerful, magnificently proportioned savage belted with a wide girdle of squirrel-tails, decked with necklaces of jaguar teeth and ebony nuts, crowned by plumes which in loftiness and splendor surpassed all other headgear present—the great chief Monitaya.

At the shore, beside a row of empty canoes, Yuara was waiting. He motioned for his men to bring their dugouts to the regular landing-place, and when they obeyed he gave brief commands. Then he turned and walked toward Monitaya.

"I go," stated Lourenço, rising. "You stay here until called. Yuara has told his men to leave all weapons in the canoes."

HE WALKED away after the son of Rana, and if any misgiving was in his heart it did not show in his confident step. Halting before the big chief, he began talking as coolly as if there were not the least doubt of welcome for himself and those with him. Monitaya gave no sign of recognition, of friendliness or of enmity. Proud, statuesque, he stood motionless, his deep eyes resting on those of the Brazilian.

"Sultry weather," remarked McKay.

"Just so, *capitao*," agreed Pedro, narrow-eyed. "We shall soon know whether we shall have storm."

"Indications are for violent thunder and lightning soon," Knowlton contributed. "See those husky club-men waiting? Looks as if a public execution were about to be pulled off."

"Yeah. But say, ain't that chief a reg'lar he-man, though! No pot-bellied fat-head like that there, now, Suby guy. Hope I don't have to drill him. I bet I won't, neither. He looks like he had brains."

Hoping Tim was right, but dubious, all watched the progress of the parley. Lourenço evidently was stating his case in logical sequence—recalling to the chief's mind the time when he had led him to revenge against the Peccaries of Peru, then going on to tell of the arrival of the strangers and the object of their search. Yuara's sudden quick glance at him showed that the Raposa had been mentioned for the first time. A little later his face became slightly sullen, and the watchers guessed that Lourenço was now referring in somewhat uncomplimentary terms to the treatment received in the *maloca* of Suba. Soon after that the Brazilian ended his speech.

In a deep, quiet tone Monitaya spoke first to Lourenço, then to one of his sub-chiefs. The bushman beckoned to his waiting companions. At the same time the sub-chief stepped out and called two names. As McKay, Knowlton, Tim and Pedro arose and stepped ashore with the weaponless men of Suba, out from the great human arc came two men. All advanced toward the chief. Though the Americans were studying the central figures as they walked, they also noticed that the pair of Mayorunas who had been summoned were lame. One walked with a stiff knee, the other as if a whole leg was paralyzed.

"Squad—halt!" muttered McKay. A step and a half, and the four stood aligned and alert, two strides from Monitaya.

The eyes of the chief dwelt long on McKay, and they were hard eyes. Without shifting his gaze he grunted a few words. The two crippled Indians stumped forward and stared sharply into McKay's face. Through a long minute the Americans felt a sinister tension grow in the air about them. Then, slowly, the cripples turned and faced their ruler. In the tones of men sure of themselves, they spoke one word.

With the utterance of that word the tension broke. Through the long line of watching tribesmen ran a murmur. The clubmen relaxed from their ready poise. The sub-chiefs glanced at one another as if disappointed. And the stern face of Monitaya himself was transformed by a wide, friendly smile.

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A sweeping gesture and the cordial timbre of the chief's voice told the Americans plainly what Lourenço translated a moment later.

"We are welcome, comrades. We shall sleep in the *maloca* of Monitaya himself, and a feast shall be made for us. Our lives have just hung on one word, but now that the word is spoken we are safe. I can not tell you more now, for I do not wholly understand this matter myself as yet—but I shall learn. Now is the time, *capitao*, to give presents, if you have any for the chief."

"I have. But our packs are in the canoe, and I'll be hanged if I'll make a beast of burden of myself at this stage of the game."

"I will have all the packs brought up, *capitao*. The men of Suba took them from us at their *maloca*—now they shall restore them before all these people."

He addressed Monitaya affably, then spoke more bruskly to Yuara. That young man, whose previous austerity now had dissolved into open friendliness, uttered four words. Immediately his men returned to the canoes and brought up not only the packs but the rifles.

From his blanket-roll McKay brought forth a cloth-wrapped package out of which he drew a half-ax, its blade gleaming dully under a protective coating of grease which he swiftly swabbed off. From his haversack he produced a heavy chain of ruby-red beads. Under the bright sun the beads glowed like living things and the glittering steel flashed back a dazzling beam.

The two gifts together had cost not more than six dollars in New York, but to the chieftain they were priceless treasures; and as McKay, with a formal bow, extended them to him his face shone with delight. Yet he made no such greedy grab for them as had been displayed by Suba when tendered the knife. His acceptance was achieved with a calm dignity which brought a twinkle of approval to the eyes of the white men.

In the same dignified manner he led the way to the *maloca* which evidently was the older of the two—the one which had always been his home. The semicircle of his subjects broke up into a disorderly crowd which streamed after him and his guests or surrounded the men of Suba with holiday greetings. Within the tribal house the adventurers proceeded to the central space where burned the chief's fire. There Monitaya ordered certain hammocks removed to make room for those of the visitors. Soon the travelers were seated at ease in their hanging beds, their packs and rifles lying on the ground beneath them, while near at hand clustered groups of Mayorunas staring at them in naive curiosity.

Pedro drew a long breath.

"*Senhores*, that was a very close call," he declared. "As Lourenço says, our lives have hung on one word. What was that word, comrade?"

"The word was 'No,'" answered Lourenço. "Monitaya asked those two crippled men, 'Is this the man?' As you saw, they looked at the *capitao*, giving no attention to the rest of us. Then they said 'No.' You will remember that the *capitao* was the one whom Suba also picked upon. As soon as Monitaya finishes talking with those men I shall ask him what all this means."

THE big chief was giving directions to a score of young fellows, who presently scattered to various parts of the house and accoutered themselves for hunting. Thereupon Lourenço approached Monitaya with the familiarity of former acquaintance, being received with a good-humored smile. For a time the two conversed. As they talked the smile of the ruler faded and his face grew dark, while into the Brazilian's voice came a wrathful growl. Finally both nodded. Lourenço returned to his hammock, frowning.

"*Capitao*, it is all because of your black hair and beard. Through all the *malocas* of the Mayorunas, far and near, has gone the word to watch for a big black-bearded man who is neither a Brazilian nor a Peruvian, but of some country unknown to these people; and when such a man is caught, to kill him and his companions without mercy. And the reason for such a command is this:

"For many moons the Mayorunas, especially those of the smaller and weaker *malocas*, have been losing women. From time to time raids have been made by gangs of gun-carrying Peruvian Indians and *mestiços*—half-breeds—who shot down the defenders of the houses before they could reach their weapons and carried off girls. This, of course, is nothing new here, for such things have happened occasionally for many years.

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But within the past five years there has been a difference in these attacks which has made them much more deadly.

"These raids used to be made always at night, and they were few and far between. But of late they have come about also in the day, at times when almost all the men of the small *malocas* were far out in the forest hunting meat and the women had little protection. Several chiefs have been killed by the raiders, who seemed to be acting according to an agreed plan, to be organized for this work, and to know when to strike and how to get away quickly. And what is more, the men who did this were not chance parties who came only to get women for themselves and then stayed away. The same men came back time after time.

"A few of these were killed, but only a few; and all the dead were Peruvians. Being dead, they could tell nothing. But the Mayorunas felt that all these raids were directed by one mind. And they became sure of this when one captured girl escaped by killing a Peruvian with his own knife and returned to her own *maloca*. She said the raiders took her and the other girls to the big man with the black beard, who waited at a safe place a day's march from the tribal house.

"A few weeks later another small *maloca* several miles from here was attacked at night while two men of Monitaya were there, having stayed out too late on a hunting-trip and taken refuge with their neighbors until day. Both these men were hit and crippled by bullets in the wild shooting that opened the attack. One was struck in the knee, the other in the lower part of the back. But both caught a glimpse of the leader's face and saw that he was the black-bearded man himself.

"So you see, *capitao*, why we have been near death. Suba and Monitaya both thought you were the man. We were lucky to escape alive from Suba, and still more lucky that here were two men who knew the face of the blackbeard."

"Schwandorf!" barked McKay.

"Yes, *capitao*, it must be the German——"

"I know it's Schwandorf! And I know his game! He's a slaver!"

"A slaver?"

"That's it. Knew I'd seen that sneak before. He worked the same game in Guiana eight years ago on a small scale. Had a gang of tough bush-niggers from over in Dutch Guiana to do his dirty work. Stole Macusi girls—they're the best-looking Indians in B. G.—and sold them like cattle to gold-miners. Cleaned up quite a pot before the English got on to him, but had to get out of the country on the hot foot—didn't have time to take his gold with him. His name wasn't Schwandorf over there, and he had no beard; he was thinner, too, and posed as a Russian; but he's the man. Must have made his getaway by the back door—down the Branco to the Amazon. Now he's running Mayoruna girls into Peru. He could sell them to rubber-men or miners and make good money, eh, Lourenço?"

"*Si.*"

"Sure. And that's why he wanted to kill off his Peruvians. They knew too much; probably were trying to bleed him for hush-money. He must have a regular slave-route and a gang of border cutthroats to do his raiding—men who don't go down-river. Murderer, slaver—wonder how many other crimes are on his soul."

"Them two are enough," growled Tim. "And he ain't got no soul."

"No soul," echoed Pedro. "You have said it, Senhor Tim. And if ever these people capture him he soon will have no body."

CHAPTER XVII

FEVER

IN THE *maloca* of Monitaya a feast was in the making.

Fires glowed all about the great room. Hunters came in bearing birds or beasts which were placed before the tribal ruler for inspection and approval. Fishermen armed with tridents or crude harpoons arrived with sizable trophies of their skill. And at length two young bowmen advanced proudly with a freshly killed wild hog. After glancing at this the chief added to his usual nod a few words of praise which made the huntsmen grin with all their pointed teeth.

Lourenço, squatting comfortably on a jaguar-skin beside the lavishly decorated hammock of Monitaya, carried on a lazy-toned monologue which probably dealt with his various experiences since his last meeting with these people and which appeared to interest and amuse the chief. The others,

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lolling back in mingled fatigue and relief from tension, studied the interior of the place and watched the activities around them.

As in the *maloca* of Suba, the small forest of poles and hammocks seemed a higgledy-piggledy maze wherein was neither beginning nor end. Yet, as the newcomers took time to observe it, they presently found that the confusion was only apparent, and that there existed an efficient and orderly arrangement. The hammocks, seemingly slung from any available pair of poles in utter disregard of one another, really were arranged in triangles.

On the ground under the hanging beds lay woven grass mats and hides of the sloth and the jaguar; and in the space enclosed by each trio of hammocks burned a small fire. The hammocks were the beds of men, the mats and furs the couches of women and children, and each fire was the focal point of the family residing in that triangle.

Above the hammocks, from transverse poles, were suspended the weapons of the men; the great bows, the long blow-guns, the fighting-spears whose deadly points now were sheathed in thick scabbards of grass, the unpoisoned fish-spears and harpoons. From these poles also hung the quivers of arrows and darts and the small rubber-covered pouches wherein a little fresh poison was carried by warrior or hunter.

Thus both the ground and the air were utilized, and by the compactness of the arrangement an entire family and its worldly goods was enabled to live in a comparatively small space. Looking around the wide room and remembering the big half-circle of Indians who had stood outside, the two ex-officers estimated that in this tribal house and its twin dwelt some seven hundred people.

Tim and Pedro, less interested in the Mayoruna domestic economy than in the Mayorunas themselves, were scanning the figures moving about in the reddish haze of smoke. Most of them were women, all nude and naïvely unconscious of any need for clothing. Like the men of the tribe, they bore the red and black rings and streaks on face and body; but, unlike the males of their species, each wore a facial ornament in the shape of an oval piece of wood thrust through the lower lip.

From time to time those near by glanced up from their work and gave the new men unmistakably friendly looks—particularly several young but well-grown girls who obviously were still unmated. In fact, these last smiled openly at the lithe, handsome Pedro, and red Tim was by no means overlooked.

"I got me orders," said Tim, *sotto voce*, "and I'm danged if I crack a smile back at them girls. But I sure feel like grinnin'. Watch yerself, old-timer, they're tryin' to flirt with ye."

Pedro, mindful of watchful eyes, turned his gaze to Tim's face before allowing himself to smile. Then he laughed.

"Do not fear," he said. "My heart is still my own."

"Same here. Specially when I remember these females would grin jest the same if them club-swingers had spattered our brains all over the front yard awhile back. But I wisht somebody'd give the girls a nightie or somethin' to wear. I been around some and I seen quite a lot, but I ain't used to bein' vamped by a bunch of undressed kids with goo-goo eyes the size of a plate o' fishballs. I'm only a bashful country kid from N'Yawk."

"Live and learn," chuckled Pedro. "And clothes really have nothing to do with modesty."

"True for ye. Clothes is mostly a disguise anyhow, specially with women, and an awful expense besides. These guys are lucky, I'll say; they ain't got to buy their wives no fur coats or silk stockin's or nothin'. All the same, I got all I can do to hold me face straight when I see these li'l owl-eyes givin' us the glad look. I'd oughter stayed back in Remate de Males, where a feller can wink at a woman without gittin' all his pardners massacreed."

"Perhaps it would not be fatal, now that we are guests of the chief. But it is best to take no chances."

"Safety first. That's us. Grin at one of 'em and another might git sore because she missed out, and first thing ye know ye've started somethin' without meanin' to. Let's look at somethin' harmless—one o' them poisoned spears, f'r instance."

At that moment Monitaya and Lourenço both arose, the chief to inspect in person the progress of the arrangements for the feast, the bushman to return to his companions with additional news.

"Monitaya tells me," he said, "that his people have lost girls in other ways than by the murderous attacks of the gunmen.

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A number of young women who have gone into the bush near their *malocas* to get *urucu* and *genipapa*, which they use to make the red and black body dyes, have disappeared. So have several who went to the creeks for their daily baths. Warriors who tried to trail them have found the footprints of a few men, but always lost them at water. The girls had been taken away in canoes. Even this tribe of Monitaya, which never has been attacked by night-raiders because it is too strong, has not been safe from these stealthy woman-stealings by daylight. Three girls have been taken from here within the past two moons, and others have disappeared from other *malocas*."

"Hm! And Schwandorf hasn't been here recently," said Knowlton.

"No. It must be that he has agents who work when he is not here, or else this is done without his knowledge. I have told Monitaya what I know of Schwandorf and he agrees that the women are taken as slaves. I have also told him that when we return down the river we shall see that Schwandorf troubles the Mayorunas no more."

"Excellent," McKay approved. "Have you asked him about the Raposa?"

"Not yet. It does not pay to hurry business with these people. After the feast is out of the way I will talk further with him."

NO MORE was said for a time. The five lounged at ease, sniffing the savory odors arising from the reddish clay pots and pans in which fruit, fish, or fowl was frying in tapir-lard or meat was stewing. At length a number of tall shapely women, apparently the handsomest of their sex in the tribe, laid a number of small mats in a semicircle on the ground before the chief and placed thereon a steaming array of edibles. Furs were placed outside the line of mats.

From somewhere appeared all four of the sub-chiefs, accompanied by Yuara. Thereupon Monitaya, with a smiling nod to his guests, squatted within the arc. Forthwith the visitors advanced in a body, disposed themselves comfortably on the furs, and assailed the viands with a vigor that brought a delighted grin to the face of their barbaric host.

Fried bananas, tender fish, broiled parrot which was not so tender, a thick stew of somewhat odorous meat seasoned with tart-tasting herbs, roast wild hog, and other things at whose identity the whites could not even guess, all were chewed and washed down with generous draughts of a rather sour liquid resembling beer. Remembering Lourenço's previous warning, each man took care not to slight any portion of the meal or to show distaste with anything, whether it pleased the palate or not. Throughout the feast the tall women hovered near, bringing fresh supplies whenever a dearth of any edible appeared to threaten. And when at last the feasters were full to repletion Monitaya himself designated what he considered titbits to tempt them further.

"Gosh, if I eat any more I'll bust, and I'm danged if I'll bust jest to satisfy this guy," asserted Tim. Wherewith he put one hand under his jaw and patted his stomach with the other, signifying that he was filled to the throat. Pedro lifted his elbows, dropped his jaw, and made motions as if gasping for air. The chieftain grinned widely. The grin became a chuckling laugh when Tim, after a vain attempt to rise, lay back at full length on his rug and begged some one to make a cigaret.

"Guess I'll have to follow Tim's example," confessed Knowlton. And he too stretched out. Pedro and Lourenço also sprawled back. McKay, after glancing around, compromised with his dignity by leaning on one elbow. The sub-chiefs and Yuara, with slight smiles, relaxed in various postures. Monitaya alone arose—not without some difficulty—and got into his hammock, where he beamed down at them.

"Suppose this is a compliment to the chief," smiled McKay. "He thinks he has eaten us helpless."

"Speakin' for li'l old Tim Ryan, that ain't no joke neither. Lookit all the girls givin' us the laugh. Who are them tall ones that's been rushin' the grub? Waitresses or somethin'?"

"Those are the chief's wives," Lourenço explained.

"Huh? Gosh, he's one brave guy, that feller. Two—four—six—eight—nine of 'em! Swell lookers, too. I s'pose he has his pick o' the whole crowd here."

"He does not have to pick them, Senhor Tim. They pick him. He and the sub-chiefs are the only ones who can take more than one wife. When a girl wishes to become the wife of the great chief or of a sub-chief she works for months making feather-dresses and necklaces and hammocks, and

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when these are done she gives them all to him. If he likes her well enough he accepts the gifts and allows her to be a wife to him."

"Yeah? And she's flattered to death, I s'pose. Wisht they'd start somethin' like that up home, or anyways fix it so's a feller could git an even break. Way it is now, a feller blows in every dollar he's got, and then when he's fixin' to git the ring the girl leaves him flat for some other guy that ain't spent his dough yet. Yo-ho-hum! I'm goin' to take a snooze right here on the table. Wake me up, somebody, when the next mess-call blows."

And with no further ado he shut his eyes and drowsed.

His companions lolled for some time smoking and watching the family life of the ordinary members of the tribe, nodding now and then to some friendly looking young fellow but ignoring the mischievous glances of the girls. Monitaya himself lay back in his hammock and dozed. His wives, stepping nonchalantly between the strangers, cleared away the remnants of the feast by the simple process of eating them. Then they carried off the clay vessels, returning so soon that the visitors strongly suspected no dish-washing had been done. Whereat Tim, who had slyly opened one eye to watch, softly sang:

"Oh, the men they wash the dishes
In Mobile!
Yeah, the men they wash the dishes
In Mobile!
Oh, the men swab out the dishes
In the water of the ditches
And they wipe 'em on their britches
In Mobile!"

"Shut up, Tim!" snickered Knowlton.

"Awright."

FOR another hour all hands rested. Then Monitaya sat up, stretched his big arms, looked casually around the house to see that all was well, and smiled down at his guests. Lourenço, rising to a squat, began a new conversation. After awhile he turned to McKay.

"The Red Bones and the Mayorunas are neither friendly nor hostile toward each other, and there is little communication between them," he reported. "From these *malocas* to the town of the Red Bones is a journey of five long days, so the men of Monitaya hardly ever go there.

"The Raposa whom we seek is known to the men of Monitaya, but he never has come here to the tribal houses. Hunters from this place have met him at times roving the wild forest, and some of the younger men fear him as the bad spirit of the jungle. The Mayorunas believe in two spirits or demons, one good and one bad, and the bad one is said to roam the wilderness seeking lone wanderers, whom he kills and eats; the people sometimes hear this demon howling at night in the dark of the moon. So the young men have thought the Raposa might be this demon and have avoided him—it would do no good to try to kill a demon, and it would only make their own deaths more sure and horrible.

"But the older men do not believe this. They say the wild man is of the Red Bone people, and that the reason why his bones are marked in red on his living body is that he is neither alive nor dead. If he were dead his body would be thrown into the water and left there until his bones were stripped by those cannibal fish, the *piranhas*, and then the bones would be dyed red and hung up in his hut, as is the custom among these people. If he were alive like other men he would not have those marks on his body, but would wear only the tribal face-paint. The bone-paint on him is a sign to all the *Ossos Vermelhos* that he is alive but dead, and is not to be treated like other men."

"Crazy!" exclaimed Knowlton.

"Yes. I think that is it—*insano*. His body lives but his mind is dead. Death in life."

"Has he been seen lately?"

The Brazilian repeated the question in the Indian tongue. The chief looked toward a certain hammock some distance off, called a name, raised an imperative hand. A slender young savage came forward. To him the chief spoke, then to Lourenço, who, as usual, relayed his information.

"This young hunter saw him six days ago while following a wild-hog trail far out in the bush toward the Red Bone region. He came on the fresh track of a man who was following the same hogs, and later he caught up with that man. It was the red-boned wild man, and the wild man was very lame, having a hurt foot. They stood and looked at each other, and then the wild man walked away, watching him closely and ready to shoot with his bow. After he disappeared in the forest this hunter heard a long shrill laugh and words that sounded like '*Podavi.*'"

"*Podavi*—Poor Davey!" ejaculated

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Knowlton. "That's he, sure enough! Then he's near his own town now—he won't go far with a bad foot. We'd better move as soon as we can. Ask about an escort."

Once more the bushman conversed with Monitaya. The ruler's smile disappeared. For some time he sat gazing out over the heads of all, evidently weighing matters in his mind. When he responded, however, it was without hesitation.

"There is neither friendliness nor enmity between the two peoples, as has been said," Lourenço stated. "Our business among the Red Bones is our own affair, not that of Monitaya, and Monitaya will make no requests for us. But in order that we may go safely and return without harm he will send with us twenty of his best men. These men will have orders to protect us at all times, unless fighting is caused by our making a needless attack on the Red Bones. In that case the Mayorunas will do nothing to help us. They will only defend themselves."

"Fair enough!" nodded McKay. "Tell him we'll start no fight. If any trouble comes it will be from the other fellows. We'll leave here tomorrow morning."

Lourenço translated the promise into Mayoruna. But the chief seemed not to hear. His eyes had narrowed and were fixed on the face of Tim, who still lay on his back and was giving no attention to what went on. Following his look, the bushman gazed critically at the red-haired man.

Tim's florid face had paled. His mouth was drawn and his eyes stared straight up, wide and glassy. Slowly he rolled his head from side to side.

"Gee, cap," he whispered hoarsely. "I et too much. My head aches so I'm fair blind, and I'm burnin' up. Gimme some water."

With a swift simultaneous movement McKay and Knowlton put their hands on his forehead. Lourenço and Pedro leaned closer and peered into his face. All four glanced at one another. Pedro nodded. His lips silently formed one dread word.

"Fever!"

CHAPTER XVIII

FRUIT OF THE TRAP

HEAVY hypodermic dosages of quinin, aided by Tim's rugged constitution and the fact that this was his first attack of the ravaging sickness of the swamp-lands, pulled him back to safety within the next two days. To safety, but not to strength. Despite his stout-hearted assertions that he was ready to hit the trail and "walk the legs off the whole danged outfit," he was obviously in no condition to stand up under the gruelling pack-work that lay ahead. Wherefore McKay, after consultation with the others of the party and, through Lourenço, with Monitaya, gave him inflexible orders.

"You'll stay here. Stick in your hammock until you're in fighting trim. Then watch yourself. Don't pull any bonehead plays that'll get these people down on you. Take quinin daily according to Knowlton's directions—he's written them on the box. If we're not back in a fortnight Monitaya will send men to find out why. If they find that we're—not coming back—you will be guided to the river, where you can get down to the Nunes place."

"But, cap——"

"No argument!"

"But listen here, for the love o' Mike! I ain't no old woman. I can stand the gaff. I'm goin' with the gang!"

"You hear the orders!" McKay snapped with assumed severity. "Think we want to be bothered with having you go sick again? You're out of shape and we've no room for lame ducks. You'll stay here!"

Tim tried another tack.

"Aw, but listen. Ye ain't goin' to desert a comrade amongst a lot o' man-eaters—right in the place where I got sick, too. Soon's I git away from here I'll be all right——"

"That stuff's no good," the captain contradicted with a tight smile. "You didn't get fever here. It's been in your system for days. You got it back on the river. These people don't have it, or any other kind of sickness. I've looked around and I know. As for the man-eaters, they're mighty decent folks toward friends. We're friends. You'll be under the personal protection of Monitaya, and his word is good as gold. It's all arranged, and you're safer here than you would be in New York."

In his heart the stubborn veteran knew McKay was right, but, like any other good soldier ordered to remain out of action, he grumbled and growled regardless. To which the ex-officers paid about as much attention as officers usually do. They went ahead with their own preparations.

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"Be of good heart, Senhor Tim," Pedro comforted mischievously. "You will not lack for company. The chief has appointed two girls to wait upon you at all times."

"Huh? Them two tall ones that's been hangin' round and fetchin' things? Are they mine?"

"Yes. They are quite handsome in their way, and strong enough to help you about if your legs remain weak. In that case you will probably be allowed to put your arms around them for support. I almost wish I could get fever too."

Tim's voice remained a growl, but his face did not look so doleful as before.

"Grrrumph! I always seem to draw big females and I don't like 'em. Gimme somethin' cute, like them l'il frog dolls in Paree—sort o' pee-teet and chick. Still a feller's got to do the best he can. Mebbe I'll live till you guys git back."

With which he availed himself of the prerogative of a sick man and grinned openly at the two comely young women who stood near at hand awaiting any demand for services. They were not at all backward in reciprocating; and despite the tribal paint and their labial ornaments, the smiles softening their faces made them not half bad to look upon.

" 'O Death where is thy sting'?" laughed Knowlton. "Be careful not to strain your heart while we're away, Tim."

"Don't worry. It's a tough old heart—been kicked round so much it's growed a shell like a turtle. Besides, I seen wild women before I ever come to the jungle."

Notwithstanding his apparent resignation, however, Tim erupted once more when his comrades shouldered their packs, picked up their guns, and spoke their thanks and good-by to Monitaya. He arose on shaky legs and desperately offered to prove his fitness by a bare-handed six-round bout with his commanding officer. When McKay, with sympathetic eyes but gruff tones, peremptorily squelched him he insisted on at least going to the door to watch his comrades start the journey from which they might or might not return. Nor did he take advantage of his chance to hug the girls on the way.

With one arm slung over the shoulders of a wiry young warrior who grinned proudly at the honor of being selected to help a guest of the great chief, he followed the departing column out into the sunshine, where the entire tribe was assembled. And when the stalwart band had filed into the shadows of the trees and vanished he stood for a time unseeing and gulping at something in his throat.

Straight away along a vague path beginning at the rear of the *malocas* marched the twenty-four—the two northerners bending under the weight of their packs, the pair of Brazilians sweeping the jungle with practised eyes, the score of Mayorunas striding velvet-footed, resplendent in brilliant new paint and head-dresses, armed with the most powerful weapons of their tribes and loftily conscious of the fact that they were chosen as Monitaya's best. Savage and civilized, each man was fit, alert, formidable. Nowhere in the loosely joined chain was a weak link.

Before the departure the Americans had been at some trouble to rid themselves of Yuara, who, with his men, had tarried at the Monitaya *malocas* during Tim's sickness. While Knowlton was giving his ripped arm a final dressing he had calmly announced his intention of joining the expedition into the Red Bone country, and it had taken some skilful argument by Lourenço to dissuade him without arousing his anger.

All four of the adventurers would gladly have taken him along had he not been hampered by his injury, but under the ruthless rule barring all men not in possession of all their strength he had to be left.

Now, as on the previous jungle marches, the way was led by two of the tribesmen, followed by the Brazilians and the Americans, after whom the main body of the escort strode in column. The leader and guide, one Tucu, was a veteran hunter, fighter, and bush-ranger, who had been more than once in the Red Bone region and withal possessed the cool judgment of mature years and long experience; a lean, silent man who, though not a sub-chief, might have made a good one if given the opportunity. With him Lourenço had already arranged that a direct course should be followed, and that whenever dense undergrowth blockaded the way the machete-men should take the lead.

FOR some time no word was spoken. The path wound on, faintly marked but easy enough to follow with Tucu picking it out. It was not one of the frequently used trails of the Monitaya people,

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but a mere *picada* or hunter's track; yet even this had its pitfalls to guard the tribal house. Soon after leaving the clearing Tucu turned aside, passed between trees off the trail, went directly under one tree whose steep-slanting roots stood up off the ground like great down-pointing fingers, and returned to the path. All followed without comment. A considerable distance was covered before any further sign of the presence of ambushed death was shown by the savages. Then it came with tragic suddenness.

Tucu grunted suddenly and, in one instant, shifted his gait from the easy swing of the march to the cat-like prowl of a hunting animal. Behind him the line grew tense. The click of rifle-hammers and of safeties being thrown off breech-bolts blended with the faint slither of arrows being swiftly drawn from quivers. Eyes searched the bush, spying no enemy.

Two more steps, and Tucu stopped, head thrust forward, eyes boring into something on the ground. Presently he advanced, prodded what he had found, and grunted again. The rest, taking care not to touch one another's weapons, crowded around and looked down at the huddled form of a man.

A matted mass of black hair, a neck burned copper-brown by sun, tattered cotton shirt and trousers, big bare dirty feet, a rusty repeating rifle of heavy calibre—these were what they saw first. The man lay straight, his face in the dirt, his hands a little ahead as if he had been crawling forward at the moment of death. Tucu turned him on his back, revealing a blanched yellow-brown face which was proof positive of his race.

"Peruvian," said Pedro.

"What got him?" demanded Knowlton. "No wound on him."

Lourenço questioned Tucu. The leader, who evidently knew just where to look, tore open the thin shirt at the left side and pointed to a tiny discoloration surrounding a red dot under the ribs. He muttered a few laconic words.

"A blow-gun trap," Lourenço explained. "The gun is set a little way beyond here. This man, sneaking along the path, broke the little cord which shot the gun. The poisoned dart struck in his side. He must have pulled out the dart, but he could not go far before his legs became paralyzed and he fell. Then, still trying to crawl, he died."

Pedro picked up the dead man's gun and worked the lever. The weapon was fully loaded and showed no sign of recent firing. Pedro coolly pumped it empty, gathered up the blunt .44 cartridges, and pocketed them for his own use.

Tucu watched the proceeding in satirical approval. Then, leaving the body where it lay, he went stooping along the path ahead, his keen eyes searching the undergrowth. In a few minutes he returned with the blood-stained dart which, as Lourenço had guessed, the stricken prowler had pulled from his flesh and dropped. This he passed to a blow-gun man. The latter carefully opened his poison-pouch, re-dipped the point of the dart, held it a moment to dry in a shaft of sunlight, and slipped it into his dart-case among a score of unused missiles.

"No waste of ammunition here," was McKay's dry comment. "What happens to this corpse now?"

Through Lourenço's mouth Tucu answered.

"It will be left here until police warriors come from the *malocas*. Certain men travel the paths daily to inspect the traps. When they find this man they will cut off his hands and feet with their wooden knives and throw the rest aside to be eaten by the animals. He has not been dead long, or he would have been devoured by some wild thing before we came. The trail-travelers will set the trap again and take the hands and feet to the *malocas*, where they will be washed, cooked and eaten."

The faces of the Americans contracted slightly. A simultaneous thought made them flash startled glances at each other.

"Tim—" Knowlton said and paused. Lourenço smiled.

"No, Senhor Tim will not be expected to eat man-meat," he assured them. "I thought of that before we left—one never knows when these traps will yield human flesh. So without letting Monitaya know why I spoke, I told him you North Americans believed the flesh of an enemy to be poisonous, and that you would not eat it on that account. Monitaya will remember that."

"By George, you have a head on your shoulders, old scout! I was worried for a minute. If they offered Tim a broiled foot or a stewed hand he'd go for his gun."

Briefly Tucu spoke. The Mayorunas separated and went into the forest seeking any sign of other enemies.

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"Queer that this chap should come here alone—if he was alone," added Knowlton. "Suppose he's the fellow that's been swiping stray girls? Or a spy?"

"Neither, I think, *senhor*. The girls were captured by more than one man, and I doubt if this one had been here before. Probably he was one of those lone prowlers of the bush whose hand is against every man. He is a half-breed, as you see, and came perhaps to steal a girl for himself. The jungle is well rid of him."

"Uh-huh. Guess you're right. Say, I'd like to see how that blow-gun trap operates. Can't understand what blows the dart when nobody is here."

"I do not know either, *senhor*. Perhaps Tucu will show us."

The savage guide, after a moment's hesitation, pointed along the trail and stalked away, the others at his heels. At a spot some fifteen yards farther on he turned into the bush at the right, walked a few paces away from the path, turned again sharply to the left, advanced once more, and halted. Before them, not easy to discern in the masking brush even though they were looking for it, hung the long barrel of the blow-gun, lashed to a couple of small trees and pointing toward the path.

Tucu stepped to the mouthpiece of the slender tube and pointed to a sapling, just behind and in line with it, which had been cut off about shoulder-high from the ground. From the tip of this thin trunk dangled a wide strip of bark. The savage, having indicated this, stood as if the action of the device were perfectly clear.

"Too deep for me," admitted McKay after a puzzled study of the tube and the trunk. The others nodded agreement. Lourenço confessed to the Indian the blindness of all.

Thereupon Tucu bent the sapling far over and released it. As it sprang erect the bark-strip slapped the end of the gun. Also, the watchers saw something hitherto unnoticed—a thin, flexible vine attached to the top of the thin stump. In monotonous gutturals the Indian talked. Lourenço's face showed understanding.

"See, comrades, this is it: The little tree is bent far down and held by the long vine. The vine passes around a low branch, then up over other limbs, and out across the path, where it is fastened to a root near the ground. A man following the path breaks the vine. The little tree then flies up and the bark-sheet strikes the wide mouthpiece of the gun. The air forced into that mouthpiece by the blow of the bark shoots the little dart. The dart does not fly as hard as if blown by a man, but it goes swiftly enough to pierce the skin of anything except a tapir. As soon as the poison is in the blood the work is done."

"It sure is done," Knowlton echoed, thinking of the short distance covered by the dead Peruvian after passing this spot. "Mighty ingenious apparatus. These people are no fools, I'll say."

"You say rightly," Pedro muttered.

Turning, they went out to the path, looking askance at the thin death-tube as they passed along it.

The scouting Mayorunas returned, having found nothing. Tucu resumed his place at the head of the line. Without a backward glance at the body sprawling in the trail at the rear, the column swung into its usual gait.

The Americans, silent before, were silent again. They had looked for the first time on the work of the Mayoruna traps; had observed the cold-blooded way in which the Indians handled the still form on the ground; had swiftly visualized the forthcoming mutilation of that body and the resultant cannibal rites. More vividly than ever before they realized that these men and Monitaya himself were relentless creatures of the jungle, and that despite the present existent friendliness there yawned between them and their barbarous allies an impassable gulf.

For the moment the jungle itself seemed a poisonous green abyss of creeping, crawling, sneaking death. And though they had faced death too often in another land to fear it in any form, though they marched on with unwavering step, their eyes were somber as in their hearts echoed the last appeal of the man they had left behind them:

"Ye ain't goin' to desert a comrade amongst a lot o' man-eaters——"

CHAPTER XIX

THE RED BONES

FOUR days the expedition tramped steadily onward through the rugged labyrinthine hills. Four nights its members slept in utter exhaustion. Neither by

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day nor by night was any sign of the Raposa seen, nor of any other human being.

So tired from the constant struggle did the Americans become that their jaded brains began to picture the mysterious wild man as a mere legendary creature, which they never should find even though they searched the inscrutable forests until the end of time. Yet when, on the fifth day, Tucu informed them that they now were nearing the principal settlement of the Red Bones, the announcement cheered them as if they were about to enter a civilized city and there meet David Rand safe and sane.

Not that any chance of striking his trail had been neglected in the meantime. It was thoroughly understood that if he were met anywhere he was to be made prisoner, and that thereafter the back-trail should be taken. Lourenço had impressed on Tucu the fact that the whole journey had for its object the finding of the wild man, and that he must not be killed if found.

Since the Indians were not in the habit of hunting so assiduously any one but a bitterly hated foe, it is quite possible that they misunderstood the spirit of the quest and believed the "dead-alive" prowler would, if captured, undergo some extremely unpleasant treatment at the hands of the white men. But, so long as it was made clear that the Raposa must be caught alive if caught at all, Lourenço did not trouble about what the Mayorunas might surmise.

Now, as the end of the long pathless trail approached, arose a question of which McKay had previously thought but had not spoken—how he was to converse with the Red Bone chief. Lourenço asked Tucu whether the Red Bones spoke the Mayoruna tongue. Tucu replied that they did not. He added, however, that the languages were not so dissimilar as to prevent some sort of understanding being reached between members of the two tribes. The veteran bushman nodded carelessly.

"When the tongue fails, *capitao*, the hands still can talk," he said. "It takes more time and work, that is all. Ah, here is a path."

It was so. For the first time since leaving the Monitaya region a path lay under their feet. And for the first time Tucu and his men, glancing along that faint track, showed hesitation.

"Why the delay?" snapped McKay.

"They suspect traps. I will go ahead and feel out the way. I have done it before on other paths."

After a few words to Tucu, Lourenço cut a long slim pole. With this in hand he preceded the column, walking slowly, pausing sometimes, continually prodding the path, studying it with unswerving gaze as he progressed. The thin but rigid feeler, strong enough to tip the cover of any pit or to spring any concealed bow or blow-gun, was at least ten feet long, and between the scout and the head of the line Tucu preserved another ten-foot interval. Progress was necessarily slow, but it was sure.

In this fashion they advanced perhaps half a mile. Not once did they have to leave the path, but Lourenço's caution did not diminish. Rather, it increased as they neared the Red Bone town. At length another path joined the one on which they were traveling. Here Lourenço paused for minutes, inspecting with extreme care the ground and the bush.

Suddenly he cocked his head as if listening. Then, with a backward motion of the hand to enjoin silence, he faced down the branch path and stood calmly waiting.

To those behind came a light rustle of leaves and a scuffle of moving feet; a sudden cessation; then Lourenço's voice speaking to some one concealed behind the intervening undergrowth. His tone was slow, quiet, easy—the tone which, even if the words were not understood, would soothe suspicious and abruptly alarmed minds. After another short silence he resumed talking, pointing carelessly to the place behind him where stood the silent file of Mayorunas. A guttural voice replied. A head peered cautiously from the edge of the bush, stared fixedly at Tucu and withdrew. The voice sounded again. Immediately three Indians stepped into view, poised for action. Another interval of staring, and they relaxed.

"Come forward, comrades," said Lourenço. They came, halting again at the junction of the trails. Tucu spoke to one of the newcomers, who scowled as if only partly understanding, but grunted some sort of answer. Those behind the Mayoruna leader craned their necks and scanned the Red Bone men, who continued to eye with evident misgiving the tall-bonneted cannibals and the broad-hatted pair of whites.

Man for man, these first Red Bones were

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in every way inferiors of the emissaries of Monitaya. Their bodies were more gaunt, their skins more coppery, their foreheads lower and their expressions much less intelligent. Furthermore, they wore not even the bark-cloth clouts which formed the sole body-covering of the Mayorunas—they were totally naked. The one point of similarity between the two tribes was that the faces of the Red Bone men were streaked with red dye. But the facial design was much different; two short transverse stripes on the forehead, and three lines on each cheek, running from the eyes, the end of the nose, and the corners of the mouth, straight back to the ears.

Studying those visages, Knowlton and McKay recalled Schwandorf's statement that these people not only ate human flesh but tortured prisoners of war. It was easy to believe that he had told the truth.

McKay, standing behind Pedro, shifted his position a bit. At once the eyes of the three Red Bones widened and riveted on his face. Heretofore they had seen only his hat and eyes, the rest being hidden from them by Pedro's neck and an intervening palm-tip. Now that they saw his black-bearded jaw they started slightly and peered intently at him.

"I think, *capitao*, you would do well to shave," Pedro suggested with a smile.

"'Fraid so," the captain granted. "Black beards evidently are *de trop* in the jungle social set at present."

But then one of the Red Bone men came forward, still squinting narrowly, and his expression was not hostile. In fact, it was more friendly than it had yet been. After a closer scrutiny, however, his face turned blank. Slowly he stepped back and muttered something to his companions.

At this Pedro's eyes narrowed speculatively. But his expression did not change and he said nothing.

A lengthy conference took place between Lourenço and Tucu on the one hand and the three Red Bone tribesmen on the other—a difficult talk in which words and sign-language both were used and frequently repeated. Eventually an understanding was reached. The three stepped back, picked up some small game which they had dropped on beholding Lourenço, returned, and led the way along the path. Lourenço cast aside his poke-stick and resumed his usual place in the column. The whole line moved ahead at a much smarter gait than before.

"Note—this path is not mined," thought Knowlton.

This proved true. Moreover, the way now was more broad and firm and travel on it much easier. After twenty minutes of rapid tramping it debouched abruptly into a cleared space. Here all halted.

BEFORE them lay a town of small low huts, crowded closely together in two parallel rows which curved together at one end. The other end lay open, giving access to a sizable creek whereon floated canoes. At the water's edge, along the crude street studded with charred stumps, and among the damp-looking huts moved naked figures of men and women occupied with various sluggish activities. Some of the men already had spied the invading party and were standing at gaze.

"Comrades, we have reached the end of our trail," said Lourenço, running a cool eye over the place. "Now all we have to do is to find your Raposa and get him and ourselves away alive."

"That's all," Knowlton echoed, unsmiling. "The reception committee is forming now." And with the words he unbuttoned his holster.

A shrill yell had run along the double line of houses, and out into the stumpy street now swarmed men armed with hastily seized weapons. Hands pointed, confused exclamations sounded and a compact detachment of warriors came jogging toward the newcomers. The three guides drew away from the Mayorunas. The latter promptly fitted arrows to their bows, inserted darts in their blow-guns, lifted spears or clubs, and with eyes glittering awaited whatever might befall.

A couple of rods away the Red Bones halted, bows ready. A hatchet-faced savage who seemed to be in command rasped something at the three hunters, who quickened their pace toward him. Tucu strode out four paces beyond his own men and stopped. Then both parties waited while the hunters reported what they knew to the hatchet-face.

"What did you tell them, Lourenço?" asked McKay.

"That we came on a friendly visit to the chief, for whom we had important words."

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"Nothing of the Raposa?"

"No. They wasted much time arguing that we must tell them all our business and let them inform the chief, while we stayed back on the path until permitted to enter the town. We told them our talk was for the chief alone, and that we should come here whether they liked it or not. So, having no choice, they led us in."

McKay made no comment. None was necessary. Furthermore, his steady eyes had caught a simultaneous head-movement of the Red Bones—a peering movement as if all were seeking some one man among the new arrivals. Pedro observed this. He spoke softly to Lourenço.

"Lourenço, tell Tucu to say to the Red Bones that we come led by a black-bearded white man; that this blackbeard comes from the far-off country where all men wear black beards; that the blackbeard will speak with the chief only."

The American looked queerly at the young Brazilian, as did Lourenço himself. But without question Lourenço obeyed. Calling to Tucu, he gave the message. Tucu moved his head slightly, but gave no other sign of having heard.

"Now, *capitao*, step forward a little and show yourself more clearly," prompted Pedro.

With another puzzled glance McKay did so. He saw that the brown eyes of the younger man held a dancing gleam, but he could not read the thought behind those eyes. Yet he noticed that as soon as he stepped out the Red Bones all focused their gaze on him. More than that, the spokesman of the three hunters pointed at him and said something to the sharp-featured leader.

Now that leader came forward alone. Six feet from Tucu he halted again and talked in a growling voice. The Mayoruna leader, cool and dignified, made answer. After a somewhat protracted exchange Tucu turned his head and motioned to Lourenço, who went forward, listened, replied shortly, and came back. Meanwhile the first detachment of Red Bones had been strongly reinforced by others who had come up singly or in small parties. Now the expedition was outnumbered at least four to one by hard-faced, brute-mouthed naked men ready, if not eager, for trouble.

"The Red Bone says we shall see the chief," Lourenço stated. "At first he said only you, *capitao*, should go to him. Then he insisted that we all lay down our arms. Tucu has told him we lay down our arms for no man or men; that we come in peace—otherwise there would be many more of us; that we leave in peace unless the Red Bones themselves bring on a fight. In that case, though we are few, there lies behind us the power of Monitaya, and behind Monitaya the power of other Mayoruna chiefs, all strong enough to wipe the Red Bone nation off the face of the ground."

"Strong stuff, that," said Knowlton.

"Strong, yes. But no stronger than is needed to impress these people. Tucu intends to prevent trouble if he can; and often the best way to prevent trouble is to make the other man realize what may happen to him if he starts it. Also he has his orders from Monitaya to stay with us at all times, and he will follow that order even if you, *capitao*, try to change it. Now go together to the chief."

He nodded to Tucu, who grunted to the Red Bone leader. The hatchet-face in turn shouted something to the man behind. Slowly they drew apart into two groups.

"You are the leader, *capitao*," suggested Lourenço. Promptly McKay marched forward, head up, eyes front, face bleak. The rest followed, Tucu falling in behind McKay when the captain passed him. Preceded by the Red Bone spokesman, the line advanced between the two bodies of copper-skins and swung along the evil-smelling avenue to its upper end.

There, in the very centre of the loop joining the two rows of huts, was a house twice as big as any other. From its doorway the inhabitants of that house could watch the whole life of the Red Bone town. Obviously it was the home of the chief. At its door a pair of warriors stood guard, but of the ruler himself there was no sign.

Ten paces from it the thin-featured leader stopped and motioned to McKay to halt. As the captain and the line behind him did so he stalked onward, passed through the doorway and faded from sight in the dimness beyond. With one accord the members of the visiting party looked around them.

The street behind now was filled with the mass of Red Bone warriors who had trooped after the column. All exit in that direction was blockaded. But the ex-officers noted that between the houses were

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spaces each wide enough to hold a couple of men, and in an undertone McKay gave defensive instructions to Lourenço.

"If fighting starts, have the Mayorunas take cover among these houses on each side. We who have guns will use the chief's house. We can sweep the whole street from there. You two fellows capture the chief alive if possible. He'll be more useful as a hostage than as a corpse."

Pedro beamed approval of this swiftly formed plan. Lourenço muttered to Tucu, who in turn passed the word down the line. Then all stood waiting.

PRESENTLY the Red Bone man came out. He shouted a name. From a doorway near at hand, where he had been standing and peering at the small but formidable body of newcomers, an old man now stepped forth and advanced, limping a little, to the hatchet-face. The latter talked briefly to him, then to Tucu. The Mayoruna leader pointed to Lourenço. The old man spoke to the Brazilian, who answered at once. Thereupon the wizened old fellow entered the chief's house.

"That old man speaks the Mayoruna tongue quite well, *capitao*," said Lourenço. "He says you and I shall enter and talk through his mouth with the chief. All others remain outside, and we must leave our rifles here."

"All right. Glad we can leave Tucu out here to control these fellows. Here, Merry." He passed his rifle to Knowlton.

Pedro took Lourenço's gun. With packs still on their backs the chosen men proceeded to the doorway and entered the house where waited the ruler of the Red Bone tribe.

Behind them the line settled into easier postures of waiting. The Red Bones, though so compactly ranged as to cut off any chance of escape, held their distance, obviously neither inclined to fraternize nor ready to precipitate conflict by crowding. Thus, while keeping their ears open for any sound of a concerted movement from behind, the visitors could use their eyes to inspect the huts nearest them.

In some of these, women stood near the doorways staring with unwinking absorption at the light-skinned, athletic men outside who were so much better to look upon than their own mates. The Mayorunas returned the stares with the brief glances of men accustomed to noticing everything but totally uninterested—as well they might be, for these poorly shaped, heavy-mouthed, mud-skinned females were not to be compared with their own women. Knowlton and Pedro too looked them over, but with the same expressions as if inspecting a family of lizards. Then they glanced into other huts now empty of life, and in a couple of these they saw rigid red-hued objects hanging from the roofs.

"The red bones of the dead, *senhor*," Pedro muttered, and his blond companion, peering again at the sinister decorations, nodded without reply.

Voices came to them from the chief's house, talking with droning deliberation. Evidently no cause for friction had yet arisen. They let their eyes rove on beyond the guarded doorway, to pause at a house a short distance away at the right. There stood a clubman, who leaned idly on his weapon but showed no intention of moving from his place. The door of that house was closed. Not only closed, but barred on the outside.

"Hm! Looks like a jail," said Knowlton. Pedro smiled, but an intent look came into his face and he studied the closed house.

Suddenly both started. At one corner of the house, unseen by the clubman, a head had cautiously slipped forth. For only an instant it hung there before dodging back out of sight. But both the watching men had seen that the face, though half masked by long dark hair and a thick beard, was much lighter than that of any Red Bone savage. And in the hair above one ear was a white streak.

CHAPTER XX

THE RAPOSA

MC KAY and Lourenço, in a broad, low, musty-smelling room, faced a man who stood and a man who sat. The man who stood was the old savage who could talk in the Mayoruna language. The man who sat was the chief of the Red Bones.

In his first words to the visitors, the old interpreter revealed that the name of the Red Bone ruler was Umanuh. Later on Lourenço informed McKay that in the Tupi *lengoa geral* of the Amazonian Indians —which, however, was not spoken by this

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tribe—the word *umanuh* meant "corpse." And whatever the name may have signified in the language of the Red Bones, its Tupi definition fitted with disagreeable precision. For Umanuh was a living cadaver.

Gaunt, gray-skinned, lank-haired, hollow of cheek and eye, with thin, cruel lips, so tight-drawn that the teeth behind seemed to show through, ribs projecting, claw-like hands resting on bony knees, his whole frame motionless as that of a man long dead, the head man of the bone-dyeing tribe was the antithesis of both the piggish Suba and the herculean Monitaya. Only his eyes lived; and those eyes were cold and merciless as those of a snake or a vulture. A man who ruled by ruthless cunning, who would gaze unmoved on the most ghastly tortures, who would devour human flesh with ghoulish relish—such was the creature who sat in a red-dyed hammock and contemplated the impassive face of McKay.

"Umanuh, great chief, eater of his enemies, with fangs of the jaguar and wisdom of the great snake, awaits the greeting of the one-whose-hair-grows-from-his-mouth," droned the old mouthpiece of the chief.

"McKay, leader of the fighting men of the Black Beards, whose voice is the thunder and whose hand spits lightning and death, gives greeting to Umanuh," responded Lourenço in a like droning tone.

A pause. Umanuh gave no sign of life. McKay, straight and cold, met the unwinking stare of the chief with his own chill gray gaze. Between the two who spoke not was a testing of wills.

"McKay brings with him none of the Black Beard warriors," pointed out the interpreter, who seemed to know his master's thought. "He comes with only the jungle men of light skins."

"McKay needs none of his own warriors when he comes in peace. If he came in war the terrible Black Beards with him would cause the whole forest to fly apart in smoke and flame. Since he walks in peace to visit his friend Umanuh, of whose wisdom he has heard, he brings only his friends the Mayorunas, who are friends also to the men of the Red Bones."

Another pause. The old man now seemed somewhat uncertain of himself. The silent duel between McKay and Umanuh went on. At length the chief's eyes flickered a trifle. In a hissing whisper he said something.

"The men of the Mayorunas never come to this country unless seeking something," the interpreter promptly spoke up. "What do they seek?"

"Only that which McKay himself seeks."

Then, turning to the captain, the Brazilian added:

"*Capitao*, we now have reached the point to talk business. Have you any presents? And is it your wish to give them now or later?"

"I have a few things. But I'll give them later—if at all. This chief is hostile. Tell him what we're here for and see how he acts."

"It has come to the ears of McKay," Lourenço informed the man of Umanuh, "that a man of the Black Beards lives among the men of the Red Bones. McKay would see that man."

Again the interpreter awaited his master's voice before answering.

"No man of the Black Beards is among the men of Umanuh," he then denied.

"If he is not among them he is near them," was Lourenço's certain reply. "He has been seen both by other Black Beards and by the Mayorunas. I too have seen him. He bears on his bones the sign that his mind is out of his skull. His eyes are green and his hair touched with white. Umanuh and his men know well that I speak true."

The pause this time was longer than before.

"There was such a man, but he is gone."

"Then McKay asks his friend Umanuh to find that one. A chief so wise can easily find him where others would see only water and mud."

"If he could be found what would the great Black Beard leader do with him?"

Lourenço thought swiftly. To say the Raposa was McKay's friend would do little good. Friendship meant nothing to this unfeeling brute. Therefore the bushman insinuated something which his cruel mind could comprehend.

"If a Red Bone man abandoned his people and went to another tribe, what would Umanuh do to him when he was found?"

A cold glimmer in the chief's eyes showed that he thought he understood. Moreover, he would much like to see what sort of torture this hard-faced Black Beard would use on a fugitive. It might be something even more fiendish than his own pastimes. So the next reply came promptly.

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"If that man is found the Black Beard will pay for him?"

"There are gifts of friendship for Umanuh," Lourenço nodded.

"The Black Beard leader will pay more than the other Black Beard?"

Lourenço almost blinked. What other Black Beard? The Raposa himself? But the Brazilian repressed his bewilderment.

"McKay will first see the man to make sure he is the Black Beard whom McKay wants," he dodged. "Then he will pay well."

"Umanuh will see the gifts now."

"The gifts cannot be shown now. They are packed away. When McKay has looked on the man Umanuh shall look on the gifts."

Another eye-duel between the chief and McKay. As before, the captain's eye proved the harder.

"Umanuh will think of the matter. Night comes. The man hunted by the Black Beard is not here. The Black Beard and his men may stay tonight across the water. When the sun rises again Umanuh will talk further."

"It is well. Let Umanuh tell his men to stay on this side of the water, that we may not mistake them in the night for enemies."

WHEN Umanuh had hissed assent the old man stepped to the doorway and summoned the hatchet-faced warrior. To him instructions were given. He turned and carried the commands to the tribesmen.

"McKay wishes Umanuh peaceful rest," said Lourenço. With which he flicked his eyes toward the door. McKay, with stiff stride, stalked out. Lourenço followed. Both felt the snake eyes of the cadaverous chief dwelling on their backs.

To the waiting Knowlton, Pedro, and Tucu it was briefly explained that preliminary negotiations had been concluded and that camp now would be made on the farther side of the creek. Tucu, observing that the Red Bone mass behind was dividing again to let the visitors pass through, gave the word to his men. The column began to move out, marching in reverse order. Pedro muttered swiftly to his partner.

"Lourenço, see that house with the barred door where the clubman stands guard. Remember where it is."

The other swept the loop in one quick glance, located the house, and fell into step without a word, the guarded structure fixed on his brain as clearly as if he had studied it for an hour. Walking down the malodorous street, he said quietly—

"There will be a small moon tonight."

"You are becoming a reader of the mind, comrade," Pedro grinned. No more was said.

Down to the shore of the creek trooped the party, followed closely by the hatchet-face and a score of tribesmen. The whites and the Mayorunas got into half a dozen of the waiting canoes and paddled across. In other dugouts the Red Bone men also crossed, but they did not land. As soon as the borrowed boats were empty the tribesmen took them in tow and returned to their own bank. The visitors were left on a partly cleared shore, separated from their uncordial hosts by some twenty yards of deep water. Not one canoe was left them. Furthermore, the Red Bones now began activities indicating an intention to establish a night-long watch on their side of the stream.

"Taking no chances of our raiding them tonight, or even snooping around town," said Knowlton. "Keeping everything in their own hands. Reckon we'd better post sentries tonight, Rod, just to keep an eye on that outpost of theirs."

McKay nodded.

"We four will take it in turn," he agreed. "Lourenço, Pedro, you, I. Three-hour tours."

"Pardon, *capitao*," interposed Pedro. "It would be well to change that. You two *senhores* take the first two watches."

"Why?" frowned McKay.

"Because Lourenço and I wish to go visiting. We are much smitten with the charms of the ladies here."

The captain's frown deepened, but he studied Pedro's devil-may-care face keenly before answering.

"Humph! What's up your sleeve? Out with it!"

Pedro glanced around him and across the water. The tribesmen, both of the Mayoruna force and of the Red Bones, were watching the colloquy.

"We are watched, *capitao*. Let us make camp now and talk later. These men do not understand our words but we cannot tell what they may see in our faces. Now speak harshly, as if I had been insolent."

McKay did. He thundered at the young

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bushman as if about to do him bodily injury. Pedro retreated a step, as if taken aback by the storm he had unleashed. When McKay stopped he replied:

"Excellent, *capitao*. Now I go to start work on the *tambo*."

He trudged away with a sullen gait. On both sides of the stream the Indians muttered and looked at the tall commander with increased respect. Truly, the Black Beard was a fierce ruler and one who must not be angered. He had the voice of a great gun and the temper of a jaguar. That other man was lucky to have his head still on his shoulders!

When the camp was made at the edge of the bush and the four comrades were grouped in their hammocks, Lourenço narrated in detail the conversation with Umanuh. Knowlton reciprocated with news of what he and Pedro had seen at the corner of the barred house.

"I almost jumped after him, Rod," he admitted. "Had all I could do to hold myself. But I knew anything sudden like that might start war right there, and we wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance of getting away with him, so I stood fast. But he's here and old Umanuh's a liar by the clock if he says otherwise."

"He is the same man we saw in the forest, Lourenço, or my eyes are twisted," added Pedro.

"Hm! Something very fishy here," commented McKay.

"Very fishy indeed, *capitao*," Lourenço echoed. "The man is within call, yet Umanuh says he is not here. And Umanuh wants us to buy the man. What is more, he asks if we will pay more than the other Black Beard. What other Black Beard? The man himself has a dark beard, and since we left headquarters Pedro and I have grown black whiskers too. Yet Umanuh cannot mean that the crazy man would pay him to stay here, or that either of us Brazilians would try to buy him. There are no other men with black beards—except the German woman-stealer; and of course he cannot be the one."

"No?" Pedro asked softly.

"No, certainly. Why? Of what were you thinking?"

Pedro's brown eyes twinkled, but he made no answer. He only inhaled a long puff from his cigaret and looked across the water at the hairpin-shaped town.

"What about that visiting trip of yours tonight?" McKay asked.

"I wish to see what is in that house with the barred door, *capitao*. When I am curious about such a matter Lourenço always becomes curious too, so I shall have to take him with me. If I did not he would say I was making love to the chief's wives."

"*Por Deus!* That may be all the barred house holds—the wives of the chief," guessed Lourenço. "Why waste time and risk death to look into that place?"

"*Quem nao arrisca nao ganha*, as the *coronel* would say—he who risks nothing gains nothing. I feel that we should visit that house. Something calls me back to it."

Lourenço studied his partner a moment, then nodded slowly. But McKay interposed decided objection.

"Too dangerous. Also unnecessary. We'll get Rand—if the man is Rand—through the chief. Your night spying might ruin everything and get you killed into the bargain. Nothing to gain and all to lose. Stay here."

Pedro's eyes hardened. But it was Lourenço who answered.

"*Capitao*, I think we had best do as Pedro says. It is a queer thing and I cannot explain it, but I have known him to have such ideas in the past and they have always worked out for the best. He himself does not know why he does some things—things which look totally foolish and which often are very dangerous—except that he feels like doing them. Yet I have never known this foolishness to fail to turn out well. He and I will go over tonight and see what we may see."

THE captain's brows drew together. Flat insubordination! Then he remembered that these men were not subordinates at all; remembered also what Coronel Nunes had said concerning their ability to get into and out of dangerous situations. When Knowlton sided with them he capitulated.

"Up in the States we'd say Pedro was 'riding his hunch,'" was the lieutenant's remark. "And I've known a hunch to bring all kinds of good luck. Gee, I'd like to go across with you lads myself! But I'm no jungle expert, especially after dark, and I'd only be in the way. Besides, we'll sure have to stick here and keep up appearances while you're gone. How will you get over?

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There's no way but swimming, and this creek's probably inhabited by the usual 'gators and snakes and things."

"When one can travel only by swimming, one swims," Pedro smiled. "Leave that to us, *senhores*. Now the sun sinks fast, and I have hunger. Let us eat."

Night was at hand. While the whites talked some of the Mayorunas had quietly slipped away into the bush, seeking whatever fresh meat might be obtainable without straying too far from camp. Naturally, the hunting was poor so near an inhabited place, but now the absent men came stealing back with a few small birds and one monkey. Though the savages asked nothing and evidently expected nothing from the whites to eke out this scant provision, the latter opened their meager larders to Tucu, ordering him to see that every man had at least a few mouthfuls to eat. Tucu, like a good commander, made no bones of accepting the invitation for the good of his men. When all hands had stowed away the last meal of the day the rations were reduced almost to the vanishing point.

"Those miserable whelps over there might have had the decency to give us a few bites," Knowlton growled, looking at the Red Bone men on the other bank, who were gorging themselves on meat brought by their women.

"It is quite possible that they intend to give us several bites later on," Pedro suggested with a mirthless smile.

"Uh-huh. Shouldn't wonder. But it's also possible that they'll have to assimilate a few lead pills before chewing us up. Rod, we'll have our work cut out standing guard tonight. I wouldn't put it past that lying old Umanuh to try rubbing us out before morning."

"Nor I," concurred McKay. "Only question is whether he dares take a chance against our guns and against the likelihood that Monitaya will send other men to investigate our disappearance. Better keep well out of sight."

As he spoke the last light of day vanished. Stars and a quarter-moon leaped out in the swiftly darkening sky. The small fire of the expedition threw dim shadows against the poles of the night shelters. Lights glimmered in the Red Bones huts, and other lights began to streak across the gloom—the bright little lanterns of fireflies coasting along the stream. But at the point where the Red Bone night-guard lurked no light shone. They had built no fire, and now they were almost invisible in the faint moonshine—sinister shadows which even now might be meditating murder and worse.

Lourenço lounged over to Tucu, who was watching those shadows with a fixed cat-stare, and informed him that until morning a man with a gun would always be on guard while the rest slept. The Indian grunted approval. By way of precaution against being killed by his own men, the Brazilian added the information that later on he and his comrade would leave the camp and go up-stream for a time. At this Tucu's eyes dwelt on his, veered to the lights of the town, and returned. In them was a plain though unspoken question. The bushman ignored it and strolled back to his *tambo*.

The moon sailed higher. The animal uproar of early night began to diminish. The fire, almost buried under slow-burning wood whose acrid smoke alleviated the insect pests, smoldered dull red. McKay and Knowlton drew lots for the first sleep, the captain winning and promptly getting under his net. In the Mayoruna shelter all was dark and silent, each man sleeping lightly with one hand on a weapon. The two Brazilians also were out of sight in their hut.

Up and down, a barely distinguishable figure, Knowlton passed slowly with holster unbuttoned and rifle cocked, eyes turning periodically to the Red Bone outpost and ears intent to pick any unusual sound out of the night noise. Gradually the small lights of the town faded out. To all appearance, sleep had whelmed it for the night. The watchers on the farther shore stirred a little at times, but the blot they made in the moonshine remained fixed in the same spot. The only moving things were the khaki-clad sentinel and the blazing fireflies.

Another hour rolled slowly by. The sentinel stopped and stood at a corner of the *tambo*. Now was as good a time as any for the Brazilians to start their perilous reconnaissance. Perhaps they had gone to sleep. He squinted at their hammocks. Yes, they were occupied. Stepping softly to the hammock of Pedro, he lifted the net to whisper to the occupant. Then he stared, dropped the net, and lifted Lourenço's curtain. A soft, self-derisive chuckle sounded in his throat as he stole out again. The hammocks were occupied, yes; but

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only by packs and rifles. Armed only with machetes, the two bushmen now were—where? He did not even know when or which way they had gone. Fine sentinel, wasn't he, to let two full-grown men sneak away right under his nose? And if they could get out so slick, why couldn't somebody else—a murderous Red Bone, for instance—get in with equal facility?

Wherefore he became all the more alert. Instead of resuming his slow pace, he stood quiet at a corner, scrutinizing everything within his range of vision, listening more intently than ever. Two or three times he leaned forward and lifted his piece as some splashing noise in the creek came to him; but each time the cannibal guards on the other bank also sprang to see what caused the sound, then grunted to one another and relaxed, so he knew it was made by piscatory or reptilian life. Near him nothing moved. And the moon sailed on westward, smoothly, steadily measuring off the silent hours of the night watch.

THEN all at once every nerve in him strained toward the back of the *tambo*. Something was there! He had not heard it—seen it—smelt it—but he felt it: a nameless thing that did not belong there. With smooth speed he pivoted, looked, listened. Nothing there.

Motionless, feeling slightly creepy, concealed under the roof-corner, he waited. A sound came—a stealthy sound. Something was creeping in. Lourenço and Pedro, perhaps? Stooping low, he peered along the ground under the hammocks.

A man was coming—coming on all fours like an animal. He was too stealthy to be either of the Brazilians. Knowlton glimpsed him only dimly, but he was sure this was no man who belonged here. And now, as on a previous occasion almost identical in its circumstances, the watchman acted in accordance with Tim Ryan's General Order Number Thirteen.

In three jumps he was upon the invader. His gun-butt crashed down on the rising head. The other collapsed on the ground.

Swiftly Knowlton snapped a match with his thumb-nail. The sudden flare half blinded him, but what he saw made him suck in his breath. When the match went out he turned the senseless body over, drew his pocket flashlight, stabbed its white ray downward. Then he committed the unpardonable sin of the army—he dropped his rifle.

Dark-haired, dark-bearded, streaked with red dye and bleeding slightly at the nose, at his feet lay the man for whom the indomitable trio had traveled thousands of miles and dared all the deaths of the jungle—the Raposa!

TO BE CONCLUDED

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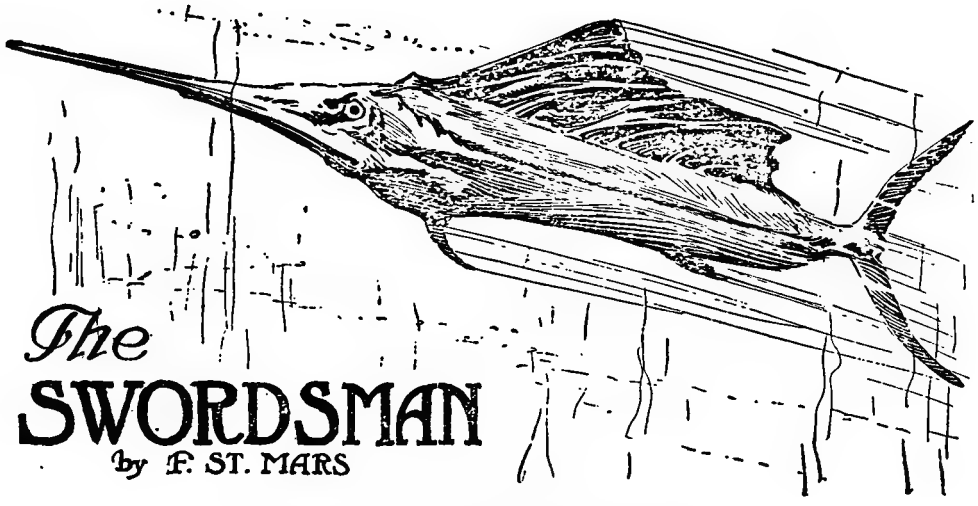

The SWORDSMAN

by F. ST. MARS

Author of "A Heroic Coward," "N'Gulule," etc.

THERE was a blue sky coming down to a blue sea. And the sea was as clear as a glass, so that you could see into its azure depths a hundred feet down, where the kelp weed waved like a forest and the fish of every hue played in and out like birds.

Suddenly into this diaphanous, tremulous blue haze of the underworld of the sea, with black eyes staring, mouths gaping, all heads pointing one way, in a blaze of silver, the frightened sardines shot. For a moment they poised, sliding forward with their own impetus. Then another blaze of silver, and they were gone.

For some minutes nothing happened. Then out of the golden, hazy shafts of piercing sunlight hurtled fiery yellow lightnings—bonito, greyhounds of the waves, crescent-tailed, swallow-finned, living projectiles, firm as glass, cutting the water like knives, each fish a miracle of marine speed.

They were gone in a second, streaking past, mere flashes of golden light, upon the heels, or the tails rather, of the sardines—but not after them. Ordinarily the sardines might have formed their prey, but not today, not in that hour. Some fear, some deadly terror, back of the faintly luminous veil of the ocean circle visible, was driving them, as it drove the sardines—inshore.

Then *he* came.

First a shadow. Then a ghost. Then, gigantic, shining, hurtling, splendid—a *fish!* He was over twelve feet long, that fish, torpedo-shaped, sinewy, lithe, smooth, hard and elastic as nickel-steel—a sapphire miracle of speed and strength incarnate, slashed athwart with raking white, tigerish stripes, armed to the teeth, aye, as with a sword, by the pointed sharp prolongation of his upper jaw, staring straight ahead as he shot with his big, hard, cold eyes, his perfect sickle tail, razor-edged and clean-cut, spurning the sea.

It was as if the very spirit of the cruel, soulless ocean had in that moment taken shape in that place. Here swam a magnificent specimen of the swordfish of the southern seas.

For a second the giant's back-fin, sharp as a huge blade, lifted from out its own sheath and cut the dazzling surface, hissing; then shut like a knife, and down he streaked, while his wake swirled above him.

Followed a pause, before the bonitos, a hundred yards away, turned the brilliant blue of the sea into a boiling caldron, as the Swordfish drew one straight, seething line along the whitened surface—on his tail, it seemed—and, in a smother of seething foam, was among them, slashing, stabbing, impaling, cutting down and blasting, hacking, maiming right and left, with sword and dagger, in a fury no human words could describe on paper.

Then—when none was left in sight to slay—with all brakes on, so to speak, he pulled up from his tremendous rush, and, swirling about on a swift cant, lazily surged

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back, to feast among the shambles he and his sword had created.

Beneath, deep down in the wonderful clear azure sea, where it was always Summer, a flabby, gray shark—jammed, for some reason he alone knew, in among the red, blue and yellow sponge-covered rocks, peering between the waving fronds of kelp, which shaded him like forest trees—saw these things happen. He was a ravenous brute, but—he made no sign.

A hundred shapes, growing swiftly from shadows to realities, darted upward into view, silver, green, gold and amber, long-fin tuna, yellow-fin tuna, and others, the fastest fish almost that swim the seas—glorified mackerel of great size, in that realm of many wonderful mackerel. The mangled, sinking fish and portions of fish had called them; but they saw the shadow of the terrible Swordfish, as the shark saw it, hanging over them like the wings of Azrael, and—flip! They were gone.

AT LAST the Swordfish receded slowly, like a figure in a dream, till he faded out from that place into the mysterious blue haze of the underworld of the sea; and when next he appeared dusk had cast her gray crape mantle over the face of the waters, and the mists were smoking on shore as if the woods were afire, and the Swordfish's plowshare of a back-fin showed sail-like, cleaving the sea of smoked glass offshore with a tiny wedge of ripples as he headed, for some dim, mysterious reason of his own, rapidly up the coast.

There was not a breath of wind stirring. Everything was as still as on the First Day.

Once as the sun touched the sea and boiled it to molten metal—red-hot, purple, ruby, amber, gold, port-wine, rose, and crimson—a killer, which is a toothed whale and a cannibal of the worst order, dashed up, all polished ebony above and spotless white beneath, and regarded the Swordfish with one little sinister eye of hateful import.

The killer was thirteen feet long, with teeth like unto tusks to match. The Swordfish was about twelve feet long, with the temper of Eblis. But the killer was looking for her young one to suckle—they have that much of softer emotions in them—and seemed to think that the Swordfish had eaten it.

The two vanished in spray—in spray, and spume, and watery spouts. Something undoubtedly awful was taking place, but no one could see it.

A fisher-boat, empty of fish and therefore inquisitive, saw that something was taking place from nearly a mile away, and hurried up with harpoon ready. And—the Swordfish leaped clean over the boat, going bang through her full set sail as if it were a paper circus hoop. And the killer stood bolt upright out of the water like a rigid, shining column of marble, and sighed a long and mournful, a cavernous and elemental, sigh. And the two drenched the occupants of the fisher-boat with water, so that they, in their fear, removed in a very great hurry.

In the interval night swept down with one imperious gesture. Holy miracles! It set the sea afire—afire everywhere, and every living thing in it afire too!

All over the deep thousands of unnamed worm things, till then undreamed of, had caught light, and came spinning to the surface, there to glow like sparks. A school of flying-fish, all ablaze, passed overhead, leaving streams of fire behind them. A leaping tuna, four hundred pounds in weight, cast up a fiery volcano as he sprang at the latter, spouting cascades of light into the air some fifteen feet high. A shoal of dolphins, the rainbow *Coryphæna* of the tropics, hurtled, hissing, along the surface in volumes of harlequin flame; and beneath, everywhere, port-holes, patches, streaks, streamers of light moved, and hurried on Heaven alone knows what mysterious business; whilst, deep down in the bowels of the sea, a mysterious, elusive blue light glowed at intervals and went out.

It seemed as if Lucifer himself had touched the ocean with his magic wand and set it ablaze. But, however it seemed, the fact is that all these marvels of the night were not the work of Lucifer at all, but simply phosphorescence, or something like it—just that, and nothing more.

Through all these fiery miracles, unheeding and alone, the Swordfish's high back-fin cut a thin thread of light as he swam out to sea steadily, till at last he faded offshore altogether.

When next he appeared, coming back, there appeared, far as eye could see, stretched right across the face of the waters in the dark, a wave of fire, hurrying shoreward, inexorable, swift, irresistibly sweeping

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along, as the prairie fire rushes toward the hills.

The wave of fire could be heard now, hissing as it came, and the wave was of—fish! Swordfish.

As a tidal wave sweeps down, so the line was upon him, a living, swimming, foaming, fiery smother of fish, hundreds of enormous scaled bodies, none probably less than one hundred pounds in weight, and some monsters among them running up to well over three hundred pounds.

It was a terrifying sight, this steady, swift onrush of the giant finny army, which the Swordfish, floating on the surface, stayed to watch, this great inshore invasion of the mighty swordfish of the ocean from—no living man knows where. They come, perhaps to spawn, that is all that is known. But when they come they are hungry. In that lies the terror.

THE Swordfish fetched about slowly, ponderously, and headed the army toward the shore. For a time he seemed to lead them, as if he were some monster pilot sent to guide them in. More likely he was an early arrival, impatiently awaiting their coming.

Soon, however, he swam among them, casting his unforgettable hynotic eyes around from side to side, and tacking hither and yon, effortless and superb, one grand, scooping thrust of his knife-blade tail hurling him fifty yards at a time, his sword cutting a white ribbon on the surface ahead of him, like the ram of a warship, till at last his sail-like back-fin ranged up near another sail-like back-fin, and—stayed there.

That, we may suppose, was the reason of his coming, to find a consort, since for the rest of that night, for the rest of his life, he became only as one of two curved-bladed, high purple back-fins, cutting through the waves always together.

For a day and half a day the army of swordfish lay in the channel offshore, well below water for the most part, though here and there the back-fin sails showed, basking on the surface in the hot sun like anchored fishing-fleets, all heads pointing one way, all big, round, strange eyes staring straight ahead into the dim, blue, deepening haze of the undersea. And the big Swordfish and his new mate basked side by side among them—taking as much notice of each other generally as two boats.

But on the third day there was no army of swordfish lying in the channel offshore, and the erected back-fins of the Swordfish and his mate were steering all alone down the coast, close in to the fringe of the kelp forest which towered up from the bottom a hundred feet or more, and waved huge branches backward and forward to the pulsations of the incoming waves.

Apparently the Swordfish's notion of ideal bliss was represented by basking, or lazily gliding, all day long, in the hot sun, under a blue sky, on a blue sea, with blue back-fin erected to catch the gentle zephyrs, and to prowl night-long, in and out of the kelpian forest glades, spitting the fat rock-bass, or shooting, like some gigantic meteor, up from the darkened deeps, into the heart of the mackerel shoals, and in coruscations of fire and flashes, stabbing, spearing, slashing, slamming, in swift seizures of blood-lust, that strewed the silver path of the moonlight with maimed and dying fish.

Times a boat came by, and the two great fish, too insolent in their pride of power to care until the very bows were almost upon them, would dive to right and left, coming up again two hundred yards apart, and always within a few minutes, by some strange devising of their own, finding each other again, and sailing on majestically side by side, as if there never had been such a thing as a boat to part them at all.

Thus the case of a big boat. Not that they were given to care very much if the boat were great or small. But once it was a little boat, and then—well, then the sea tiger's sword missed her stern by five inches as he charged, and that boat went from that place in some haste.

Also there was another swordfish—a rival from nowhere. He loomed up out of the blue in the shape of a regal purple fantom, and backed away with a challenging rush for the charge.

For a space the two males slid warily round one another, jockeying for an opening. Then, in a flash, as the silver torpedo leaves the tube—if ever torpedo could attain such ferocious speed—they charged. Now the attacking swordfish was no bungler in his aim, but a very master of fence. Only, the Swordfish canted at the last moment, the better to give the last ounce of weight to his three-hundred-odd-pound thrust. And that fact saved him.

The searing sting of his opponent's sword,

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ripping a shallow, vivid line along his side, straightened him to the rigidity of a steel girder, as they met with a crash that only by a miracle, it seemed, failed to break every bone in their bodies. Perhaps their odd, high-domed necks were special shock-absorbers for this sort of work. Anyway they survived. At least, the Swordfish did, wrenching like a dumb devil to free himself from the lashing incubus of his stranger foe, whom he had run clean through, in a scientific and horribly precise fashion, just exactly behind his side fins.

It was a fatal wound, but the Swordfish was taking no chances, and made it fatal ten times over by charging his writhing, slashing, tearing, maddened monster rival again and again, before he left him rolling helplessly in the trough, molten-silver belly up, to amuse the gulls and tell any whom it might concern that he, the tiger of the seas, had passed that way.

The two erect back-fins sailed on again, unheeding, side by side, down the coast, their owners apparently thinking—if they thought at all—no more of the battle, in a life made up of little else than battles in one form or another.

But Fate was at hand in the shape of a small, innocent-seeming, white boat, propelled by no visible means of propulsion, easily and quietly sliding across the azure deep; and the two haughty swordfish lazily dived at the very last moment, to let her by, and came up together astern with insolent self-composure and unconcern.

THE mighty pair took no more notice of her. Nor, for a bit, did they take any notice of the eighteen-inch-long flying-fish that followed that boat, skimming over the surface as if in a great hurry to catch it up. But that was only their way.

Suddenly when the flying-fish had passed, both big, shear-like back-fins shut down into their respective sheaths, and both monsters dived.

When next they appeared it was from nowhere special, close by the flying-fish, and dashing for it with a concerted rush. The female, the tigress of the seas, held on with mouth agape; but as her companion was similarly approaching it, some dim, cold memory back of his sluggish, fishy brain, seemed to awaken in his mind—and he swerved aside.

Next instant he shot round and down like a meteor, and under like a spent shell, for he had seen what the men in the boat had anticipated. His startled mate checked and reared almost straight up, wrenched madly at an invisible something, and with the luckless flying-fish still in her jaws spun like a top and went tearing out to sea, half out of water, in one straight, streaking rush that left a ruled and hissing wave in her wake—towing the boat after her.

Once she leaped. Twice she leaped, full five feet into the air, sending the water back in smashing cascades and flinging her head about from side to side. Once she turned, and twice she turned, and charged the boat with wicked intent, or, perhaps, blindly, but with lance in rest and the speed of a torpedo—only to miss it by inches, as it backed away. And once she made a complete circle of the boat on her tail, drenching the occupants with spray.

One mile she raced. Two miles she tore. Many times she leaped the height of a tall man's head. Then—mile upon mile, hour after hour, she swam, and dashed, and leaped, and charged, and tore, like a creature possessed of ten thousand devils; but it was all no good.

The number twenty-four line on the sixteen-ounce rod, with the twenty-times patented brake-fitted reel, wonderful as it may seem, held on; and in the end, fighting to the last with a devilish savagery that made the fishermen hold their breath, she was brought to the side of the gasoline launch, even to the cruel and gripping gaff, and ignominiously, in a fountain of foam, done to death.

So far the Swordfish had taken no hand in the game, was no party to the affair. Perhaps he did not understand it, but more probably he did, dimly, because the memory that had saved him was the memory of having once been caught in such a way, and—of going into the seascape with all the line and parts of a broken rod. Anyhow nobody remembered him now.

Then they did!

He came. The fishermen realized it with an amazed—

"Look out!"

He came, reared right up and half on his tail, lance in rest, at a tremendous rate. A long, snarling wave came with him, and his big round, fixed eye gleamed in the sun.

He arrived. The boatman, making

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himself scarce behind the engine, and the two fishermen, hunting for a place to hide in the bottom of the boat, felt him come, but by a miracle he missed, the boatman putting the launch hard over, and at best speed making for the shore—missed by one and a quarter inches, and no more.

He was looking for his mate!

And then— Then, blind with seeming rage, he went, charged on, straight as a ruled purple bolt, into the bloodshot eye of the setting sun. Fate arranged it that the sloop, the U. S. S. *Peradventure*, standing out to the open sea, should at that moment glide in perfect silhouette against that setting sun.

The Swordfish did not stop. He was crazy at his loss—Berserk!

Somebody yelled overside. Somebody ran, with flying bare feet, across the deck. Somebody swore strange oaths in a stranger tongue.

There was a dull shock as the Swordfish struck the sloop at fullest of full speed, fair amidships. The U. S. S. *Peradventure* winced visibly, and jarred throughout her frame, and—a tug had to come out and tow her back to port again, leaking like a state secret.

In port they docked her; and in dock they found the sword broken short off, driven clean through planking, timber, and a beam. The planking was two inches, the timber five, and the beam an inch and one half of oak, and— But what a blow!

The Swordfish they never found, though the blow probably ended him with concussion of the brain. Heaven alone knows what became of him, though perhaps the sharks might tell in parts.

FROZEN LUCK

By Ramon Stone Bradon

"SHIFTY PETE" lay stretched on the floor of the cabin where Lem Flane's blow had landed him.

"I'll learn you to fill yourself up with grub on the quiet, after we agreed to go short so as to make it last out!" exclaimed Flane. "Now, get up."

Pete slowly rose to his feet. His eyes glowed like a tiger's. He clenched his fists and then unclenched them helplessly. Lem was too big.

"I suppose you ain't never took nothing on the quiet," he said sullenly.

"Well, maybe I have and maybe I haven't," returned Flane, "but I ain't never took anything from a pardner of mine yet, if that is what you mean."

"We ain't pardners to hurt," sneered Pete.

"That's right, too," agreed Flane. "I wouldn't never have took up with a little runt like you, except you was the only human I knowed who was wishful to come up this far north of the circle and see what was in the ground."

"Well, there ain't nothin'," muttered Pete bitterly. "I was a fool."

"Like enough," asserted Flane. "But we've got to get back down to Koyukuk again, just the same. And we ain't goin' to

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if you eat up all the grub before we start," he added savagely. "It's goin' to be a hard pull anyway, seein' as we lost all our dogs but one, when they went into that air-hole down on the big creek."

"The time you drove them into it," injected Pete spitefully.

"What's the use of rakin' that up?" demanded Flane. "I didn't know the air-hole was there, did I? And, anyway, I saved the grub and one dog."

Pete muttered something.

Flane stretched his big limbs with a careless laugh.

"Now, look here, Pete, it ain't no use our jawin' and pullin' apart. We two are alone up here in this far-off frozen place, tied together tighter than man and wife; and we've got to stay by the grub and pull together till we get out, just the same as if we liked it."

Shifty Pete looked up with furtive eyes at big, selfish, domineering Lem Flane, and sourly acquiesced.

It was the outgrowth of necessity. It was the philosophy of the North. Everything—quarrels, blows, hatreds—had to give way, to be put aside, in the face of the grim struggle for existence.

"Now, look here, Pete," went on Flane calmly. "If you take any more than your share of grub again, I'll kill you. I ain't got no use for you anyhow, but if you act half-way square, we'll get along all right enough till we make it back to Altus, down there on the river, and right then we quit! Understand?"

Pete nodded impassively.

"Now here is the program," declared Flane, in his domineering voice. "We ain't got grub enough to risk stayin' any longer. In the mornin' we will shovel out the dirt that's thawed by the fire we put in the drift this afternoon. We will give it that one more chance to show up somethin', and then we'll pull our freight. We ought to make it back to the river in two weeks, and we'll get there hungry, too," he added grimly. "We've stayed most too long already, huntin' for somethin' that ain't here, and we've got to travel hard to make the grub last out."

It grew colder in the night and the cabin was a long time warming up the next morning. Pete shivered and kept the stove crammed full of crackling wood. Flane looked at him contemptuously.

"I guess you are more at home in Arizony, Pete, than in Alaska," he commented, as they put on their fur caps and mittens and started out.

The drift that they were working in was some distance from the cabin, around a bend in the creek, and hidden by a clump of timber.

Flane walked in the lead. As they went along, he looked across the desolate fields of snow.

"There is miles of it to travel before we are out of this," he muttered.

As they clambered down the hole and entered the drift, he said—

"We'll just shovel the gravel behind us, Pete, and then we'll take a pan from bedrock as far in as we can get and see what's in it."

After they had finished their work, they came blinking back into daylight, Flane carrying a pan of gravel on his arm.

"I bet there ain't nothin' in it," grumbled Pete.

"You never can tell," returned Flane. "We'll know more about it after we have panned it out. What makes you limp?" he asked. "What's the matter with you?"

"A rock fell on my foot in the drift," answered Pete. "It ain't nothin'. I'll put some pain-killer on it."

As they rounded the bend in the creek, Flane stopped dead still in his tracks and stared.

"What's that smoke?" he cried. "Where is the cabin? By Heaven, it's burnt down!"

The pan of gravel dropped from his arm and clattered noisily on the trail.

The two men raced forward. In a moment they were standing beside the still burning ruins of the cabin.

"The grub!" The words came through Pete's white lips almost in a whisper, as if he feared to speak them, even to think them.

"It's in there!" returned Flane. "Burnt to ashes! Every bit of it!"

Pete began pulling madly at the ruins.

"Quit that," snarled Flane. "Can't you see that everything is burnt up? Nothin' could stand that heat. Even our guns are in there somewhere, with the stocks burnt off and the barrels twisted up. You heated up the cabin good and plenty this mornin', you infernal fool!" he ejaculated fiercely. "I hope you are warm enough now!"

"What will we do?" quavered Pete.

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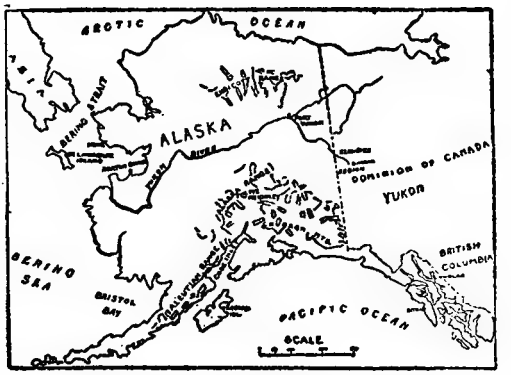
"Do?" snapped Flane. "We'll start for the Koyukuk right now!"

"What'll we eat?"

"Eat! How do I know? What will we eat if we stay here? It's lucky I hung our snow-shoes on the tree there, instead of puttin' them in the cabin. We've got them to go on, any way, and they say the strings make good eatin' in a pinch. I ain't never tried them—yet."



ALASKA AND THE KLONDIKE REGION

Pete looked around hopelessly; then his eyes brightened.

"There is the dog," he said, pointing.

"What good is he?" growled Flane. "There's nothin' to pull."

"He is good to eat!"

"Sure!" cried Flane. "You ain't such a darn fool after all. We'll let him follow us on hoof, as they say down in Arizony, till—till—till we need him. Come on. Every minute counts now! It ain't no trouble to get ready, because we ain't got nothin' to get ready. Here is my ax stickin' in this choppin'-block. That's lucky! Your'n was in the cabin. I'll break trail. Come on!"

ALL the rest of the day, and far into the moon-lit night, the two men traveled steadily on, hardly exchanging a word, the dog following in their snow-shoe trail, a gaunt shadow in the rear.

At last they stopped and camped for a few hours—a very few, for their need to get on was desperate. Without food and without guns, theirs was a race with starvation and death.

The arctic Spring was beginning, and the intense cold of Winter was over; but nights were still bitter and the men were stiff and hungry. The dog huddled about the fire with them.

"I wish the Pain-Killer wasn't burnt up," grumbled Pete fretfully. "I'd like to put some on my foot."

The next march was a long one. Flane setting the pace relentlessly hour after hour. Pete fell behind at times and Flane heard him groan.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Why don't you keep up?"

"It's my foot," answered Pete. "It hurts."

"This ain't no time for a sore foot," returned Flane harshly. "If you can't travel fast you are a dead man."

"It ain't nothin'," declared Pete, catching up. "It ain't nothin'," he repeated, as if trying to reassure himself.

When they halted for rest that night, their faces were gaunt with hunger. Pete looked at the dog, who was sniffing about in vain search for food, and stretched out his hand.

"No—not yet," cut in Flane. "Wait till we're hungrier. Let him carry himself for awhile. It's easier."

The two men took turns keeping up the fire during the short hours they dared spare themselves for rest. The hungry dog prowled about and howled dismally.

Flane was ready to start first.

"Come on, Pete!" he exclaimed impatiently. "Are you goin' to take a week to fix on them snow-shoes?"

"Go ahead, I'm comin'. It's my foot—it's swelled up some; but I'm comin'."

Flane started out at the killing pace of of the day before. Pete followed him for a time, limping desperately, beads of perspiration starting on his face. Suddenly he sank down on the trail, with a groan.

Flane turned upon him savagely.

"What's the matter with you. What are you sittin' down for?"

Pete mumbled something.

"What's the matter with you?" yelled Flane, in sudden fury.

"It's my foot, Lem," said Pete, as if confessing a fault. "Just give me a little time. It's stiff-like, and it burns—like fire."

Flane's face was set in hard lines.

"There ain't no time to give you. We've just got to get on. You know that."

"Yes, I know," answered Pete, struggling to his feet. He took a few steps and sank down again.

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He looked up at Flane with a dumb horror in his face.

"I can't make it, Lem," he said at last.

Flane stared down at him with somber eyes.

"Just take a look at my foot, Lem," went on Pete, hastily beginning to untie his moccasin. "Maybe you can tell what's the matter with it."

"I don't want to look at it," returned Flane gruffly. "I ain't no doctor. Well, all right, go ahead," he added, in answer to Pete's look of entreaty. "But I can't do nothin'."

Pete pulled off his moccasin and thick stockings from his swollen foot.

Flane ran his hand over it.

Pete winced with pain.

"It looks like one of the small bones might be broke," said Flane shortly, and again he regarded Pete with somber, speculative eyes. Then he turned away and called to the dog.

"What are you goin' to do, Lem?" asked Pete.

"Kill the dog. I'll give you the biggest half."

Pete began to tremble.

"Lem, you ain't goin' to——"

Flane turned abruptly away and called loudly:

"Here, Mukluk! Here, Mukluk!"

The dog came up sniffing for the expected food but, as Flane reached for him, he sprang away with a suspicious yelp and ran back along the snow-shoe trail they had left behind them. Flane followed after him, alternately cursing and cajoling.

Pete sat and watched them fixedly until they disappeared behind some trees. Then he looked at his foot and muttered to himself. He was shivering like a man with the ague.

IT WAS a long time before Flane came back and he came without the dog.

"I couldn't catch him, he's gone," he said shortly. "We have lost him. I reckon he has gone back to where he was fed last—back to where the cabin was."

Pete said nothing.

Flane looked at him and moved restlessly.

"How many matches have you got, Pete?" he asked.

Pete shook his head.

"Not any."

Flane took a box from his pocket and began separating the matches into two piles.

"What are you doin', Lem?"

"Can't you see?" demanded Flane irritably. "I'm dividin' up the matches. Don't you want none?"

"Lem, you—you ain't goin' to leave me?'

Pete was shaking again.

"Do you think that I'm goin' to sit here and starve without makin' a run for it?" demanded Flane. "What good would that do you? You can't travel and I can't carry you. I'll leave you the ax."

Pete searched grimly for some sign of relenting in his partner's grim face, and then at the supreme moment, something like dignity came into his own.

"There sure ain't no use of your starvin', Lem, without a run for your money," he said quietly. "If you make it out, tell the boys——"

"I won't tell the boys nothin'," broke in Flane, with sudden fierceness.

Then he slowly got to his feet.

"If you can travel, come on," he said thickly. "If you can't, it's tough, but it's no fault of mine. I'm off, so long."

"So long," returned Pete.

That was all.

Flane walked rapidly away, and disappeared without turning his head.

Pete impassively watched him go. There was nothing to do about it. Then he looked down at his foot. "I wish I had some Pain-Killer to rub on it," he muttered complainingly. "Then maybe I could get a show to make it back to the river, like Lem, before I——"

He stopped with a shiver.

"My ——! Have I got to starve here without no show?" he cried desperately. "I won't never do it. I've got to travel some way, if it kills me. I can't stand it to starve! I can't! But what will I do?" he muttered, burying his face in his hands.

As if in answer, he heard a whine close beside him. He turned abruptly.

It was the dog. He had come back.

The man's eyes glittered. His pinched face became suddenly cunning.

"Here, Mukluk, come here!" he called, carelessly snapping his fingers.

The dog waved his bushy tail, and looked at the man with expectant, greedy eyes, but when Pete edged a little closer, he backed away, growling.

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Pete made a sudden rush for him. The dog bounded out of reach and Pete sank down on the snow, weak with the pain of his foot.

"I've got to get him—I've got to get him!" Pete muttered. "And I can't," he ended with a half-sob.

Next he tried strategy. He remained perfectly still, hoping that the dog would grow careless and come within reach. But the animal refused to be tempted and kept moving farther away.

Pete watched his motions in an agony of apprehension. What if he went away again, and stayed?

The dog was now circling around one of the clumps of small trees that dotted the snow-covered plain, sniffing the air.

"He is tryin' to make himself believe that he smells somethin' to eat," Pete muttered with a sour smile. "And that's all the good it will do him."

Suddenly the dog ran in among the trees and Pete heard him give a succession of sharp yelps. Then he came out, still yelping and to Pete's amazement ran straight up to him; but when Pete pounced upon him desperately, the dog slipped away from under his hands and darted back into the clump, still yelping.

"Maybe he has treed somethin'!" exclaimed Pete, crawling painfully after him through the snow—walking was torture now.

When the dog saw him coming, he began to leap into the air at something high above his head among the trees.

Pete looked up.

"A cache!" he screamed. "Grub!"

Pete sprang to his feet, never feeling the pain, and rushed at his salvation.

There on a platform raised high upon poles, under a snow-covered canvas, the outline of bags showed.

Pete climbed one of the supports like a madman, and, tearing off the canvas, seized something from the pile, and slid with it to the ground in an ecstasy of haste.

"Bacon!" he cried, tearing furiously at it with his teeth.

The dog pawed him and whined.

Pete opened his knife, cut off a big chunk and threw it into the jaws of the famished animal.

Man and dog, side by side, gnawed at the frozen meat.

Finally the man was satisfied. He looked up. "Good, ain't it, Mukluk?" he grinned.

The dog snarled, bolted the last of his hunk, and ran his quick tongue over his jaws.

"Now we'll see what more there is in the cache," said Pete, climbing up again, more slowly this time.

"Lord, how my foot hurts!"

He groaned as he pulled himself on the platform and began rummaging.

"Bacon! Flour! Beans!" Each word was a shrill cry of triumph. Then Pete's eyes fixed themselves on the mark on the bags.

"That's his mark!" ejaculated Pete. "They belong to Sandy Walsh, the feller his pardner was haulin' back to Altus, sick, when we passed them on our way up here last Fall. They said they cached some grub when they turned back. Well, Sandy won't want it this season, and I guess he won't never want it by the way he looked," continued Pete reflectively. "He was sure pretty nigh his finish when I seen him."

Throwing a sack of flour and a frying-pan he had found, down into the snow, Pete slid down after them.

"Lord, the luck of it!" he exclaimed. "And Lem hittin' the trail with nothin' in his belly. And goin' on and on till he drops. For he ain't goin' to make it. No man could. There's enough for Lem, too," he went on meditatively, looking up at the cache. "Well, it's his own lookout. He deserted me and we was pardners. He took the best chance—the same as I would," he added candidly, after a pause. "And he left me the ax, and he needed the ax bad. That was mighty white of Lem. I wouldn't never done it, I guess."

He looked up again at the cache. Then, as if in answer to a question, he muttered:

"How can I? I can't travel till my foot gets well. I ain't got no way of catchin' him."

THE dog was eyeing the unfinished piece of bacon which Pete had tucked in the crotch of a tree out of his reach.

"By thunder!" exclaimed Pete. "Mukluk could, if I only knew how to make him. I couldn't write Lem no message to come back, because I ain't much on the write."

Then his eyes fell on the bacon.

"I could wrap that up in a sack, and tie it on Mukluk. Lem would sure know that

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there was more where that come from, and make tracks back. I'll tie it on," he nodded to himself.

He wrapped up the bacon in a sack he got from the cache.

"Come here, Mukluk," he called.

The dog came up to him quite confidently now, and Pete tied the bacon across his back.

"Now, Mukluk," said Pete, limping with the dog to where Lem's snow-shoe tracks led away south. "See that trail? Go on, now, and find Lem! Fetch him, Mukluk, fetch him! Good dog! Mush, now!"

Pete pushed Mukluk forward along the trail as he spoke; but the dog, suddenly grown suspicious again, turned in his tracks and bolted off in the opposite direction.

"Here, Mukluk, come back!" called Pete. "I ain't goin' to hurt you."

The dog had disappeared.

"Curse the brute!" ejaculated Pete. "I done my best to help you, Lem," he muttered fretfully. "I can't go after you; I can't travel. And you starvin' to death and plenty right here for the askin'! Mukluk, for ——'s sake come back!" he cried.

His voice broke with weakness, and he sat down, head bowed, in bitter dejection.

"Hello, Pete!"

The voice seemed to come from away off. Pete raised his head, and stared as if he saw a ghost.

Before him stood Lem Flane, his cheeks sunken, his eyes like those of a famished animal.

"Lem! What brought you back?"

"Because we is pardners," answered Flane. "I traveled fast, but all the time I see you lyin' here crippled up and starvin' all alone—and me, your pardner, desertin' you. And, if I got out, I knowed I would always see you as long as I lived. I ain't got no likin' for you, Pete. I ain't pretendin' any, but you're my pardner. I couldn't get away from that. I ain't never deserted a pardner before—so I come back to travel the same road as you. I guess it won't be long."

For a moment Shifty Pete couldn't speak. Then he gulped over his words.

"Lem, I couldn't travel—I tried to make Mukluk go and bring you back. I tied a piece of bacon on him for a message, but the cussed dog ran the other way; he ain't come back yet. I was waitin' for him. I done my best, Lem—honest."

"Bacon!" ejaculated Flane. "Pete, you're loco! I suppose that's the way we'll both get soon," he muttered, half to himself.

"Bacon! And beans! And flour!" shrieked Pete hysterically. "Me and Mukluk found a cache! There the brute is now," he cried, pointing down the trail, "comin' back with the bacon still tied to him! Ask him! Come on, Lem! Come on, quick!"

And half-dragging, half-leaning on Flane, Pete limped with him over to the clump of trees and pointed to the cache. And then, before Flane could make a move, he climbed up and threw a side of bacon straight down into Flane's arms.

Flane gazed at it with ravenous eyes but, before he took his first mouthful, he looked up at Pete and said solemnly:

"Pete, I didn't guess you right. You're a pardner—and a man."

Pete grinned.

"That makes my foot feel good," he said.

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UNITS OF VALUE

By EDGAR YOUNG

Author of "The Sun-God Trail," "A Few Will Remember," etc.

FROM its high perch between zenith and horizon the red sun looked down upon the western slopes of the vast and mighty Andes, spanning from tropic heat to perpetual snow, jungle-clad along the bases, broken and gashed by valleys and passes through the forested foot-hills, mounting gaunt and gray to the hoary-headed peaks that stretched in an endless line to north and south.

The man bent under his heavy pack as he picked his way through the heavy boulders which strewed the floor of the cañon. His hobnailed boots rang noisily and reechoed from the sheer cañon walls on either side. A tiny stream of water threaded its way through the stones, and the man paused now and again to peer fixedly into the bottom of some shallow pool or at a bank of gravel which had been piled up to one side with the high water of past freshets.

From far down at the coast he had followed this stream. Down there it had been a wide river and he had paddled up it in a canoe, stopping now and then to pan sand for traces of flour gold or plucking handsful of moss and washing the dust from it to see if it contained specks of gold small enough to defy the laws of gravity and float upon water. Fifty miles inland he had been forced to pole his craft up-stream against the swift current. Later he had walked by the side of the stream making tests from sands and gravel of curves and shallows. And now it was a mere trickle which almost hid itself away among the boulders.

Suddenly he stopped with such abruptness that his flopping white hat fell from his head. His shaggy red mane tossed wildly as he stripped off his pack and flung it behind him. A yell of exultation sprang from his lips as he dashed forward. A shallow pool, a basin of stone in the cañon floor was before him, and the bottom of this pool glowed dully with golden nuggets and heaps of smaller grains of the precious metal. He floundered into the water to his knees, groping for the larger nuggets, seizing them, piling them into his arms and staggering to the bank. His blue eyes gleamed.

A volley of words poured from his lips through the bristling matted beard, a chant of triumph and of pleasure. In a frenzy he worked, dashing into the water, seizing an armful of gold and springing out again. At times he paused to dance a few steps of double shuffle on some flat stone and to raise his voice higher in primitive whoops of pleasure.

The larger nuggets were soon piled in a heap on the bank. He ran to his pack and brought his pan which had been lashed on top of the pack. Using this as a scoop he felt along the bottom of the pool, sweeping the small rough nuggets and dust into it with his other hand. When it was filled he ran to the bank and made a pile beside

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the larger one. This pile mounted higher and higher with each panful he dumped upon it. Finally the amount decreased until he brought no more than a handful at a time.

At last he finished and stood mopping his brow and neck with a huge blue bandanna. He gazed fixedly up the cañon and at the walls on either side. There was no trace of a quartz ledge to be seen. The gold had come down from above. The rock-bound basin had acted as a huge pan to hold the metal when lighter material was swept downward with the current when the pass was a foaming cataract.

The man's scrutiny and cogitation was punctuated with a grunt. He flopped down to a sitting position between the two piles of gold. They stood up even with his shoulders on either side. He clutched their summits and with an embracing motion of his shaggy arms and huge gnarled hands dragged the gold toward him until it piled against his body and pressed like a vise and rolled like loose stones and pebbles between his legs and covered them over until only the toes of the shoes protruded.

He threw his body from side to side and bent his head until it rested upon the gold first on one side of him and then the other, meanwhile giving vent to short sighs and grunts of keen pleasure.

Tiring of this he began to pick up the largest of the nuggets, great yellow, glowing chunks as large as oranges, and stare at them with the intensity of a crystal-gazer, looking at and within the gold, feeling its potent charm, thrilling with the ecstasy of the touch of his hands upon its rough surface, bending his head and kissing the metal with bursts of emotion that belied his great frame and rough exterior.

He ran his hands down into the pile of fine dust and pebbles of gold and brought forth heaping handfuls, pouring the dust from hand to hand and allowing it to run away through his fingers, rubbing quantities of it between his palms until the sharp pieces bit with pain into the flesh, bowing his head and pouring handsful of it upon his head and trembling with pleasure as it coursed in trickles down through his coarse red hair and tangled beard.

At last sated with gloating he glanced up. On the other side of the pool a score of Indians had crept up silently and were standing tensely watching with mingled curiosity, primitive hatred, savage superstition and greed for that prized object he bore upon his shoulders, his massive head, a pearl of rare price, the equal of which did not blacken upon the rafters of any lodge in the Jivero land.

Hands gripped spears and arms went back for the throw, vise-like fingers gripped arrows that strained at the sinews of the nine-foot bows, yet none had loosed for the thud into the hairy brown chest that gleamed like copper through the open blue shirt-front. The strangeness of this creature, like themselves yet unlike, red of hair, bearded, wrapped in peculiar clothing, hard of hoof like the tapir of the jungle, a thing that grunted and chuckled in strange sighs and sounds.

And the gold. This and this alone had double held their hands. This yellow stuff upon which rested a curse, the curse that had been passed down and down from distant ages, through chief and medicine-man so that no Indian of any tribe so untaught in the forbidden things of nature that he would touch it.

A useless, vile thing yet the head-men of the tribes now and again spoke tales of its magic in the past, that millions of their kind had perished from having hoarded it. Human heads and not gold was their standard of value.

NEEDLESS to say, such thoughts had been had before the red one glanced up and saw them. He gave one gasp and his jaw dropped for an instant with amazement. Then he sprang upward and sidewise with a terrific roar of rage. A score of spears and arrows crashed as one into the pile of gold where he sat but an instant before. He fell flat upon his belly and started wiggling his way toward his blanket-roll.

He was trying to reach the carbine that hung by a ring from one of the pack-straps or the bristling belt and the six-gun that he had tossed down beside the pack.

Fool! He cursed himself fervently, his thoughts wild and racing like lightning, as his body touched the ground. No! His keen eyes saw spears leave hands. His straining ears heard the sharp whang of bow-thongs. He sprang from all fours into the air, twisting in mid-flight like a cavorting bronco and turning a handspring as he came down.

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As his feet touched ground he leaped into the pool. His boots beat the water to froth as he dashed through and into the midst of the savages. Carry the fight to them! This is the code of camp and trail. As he gave the final plunge that landed him amongst them they milled around him and attacked him fiercely.

He was a screaming, twisting, dodging demon. Arrows grazed his face and neck and the red blood oozed down and dyed the red beard a still more fiery red. Spears tore at his clothing.

His two fists were moving like trip-hammers. His boots were flying into groins and bellies. A medley of shouts and screams rent the air. A few went down from the impact of his heavy blows and crawled dazedly to their feet. The rest swarmed upon him and beat him backward with the flat of their spears and the heavy stocks of their long bows. The struggling mass moved into the pool and the water churned with the spasmodic struggle of many dancing feet.

The red monster was knocked to his knees and his hairy face was forced beneath the water. He clutched bodies around him and hugged them to him as he arose. He shook his head savagely and battered the suffocating mass away from him.

He ceased to give vent to his growls and shouts. His fierce rage had passed that stage. His steel jaws snapped shut with a click and his teeth gritted as he clamped them together. His cold blue eyes fixed in a flinty stare beneath the bristling brows that dripped blood. A long war-arrow was hanging in the fleshy part of his neck with the bone-barbed head thrust out behind. He smiled sneeringly as he snatched it and dragged the feathered shaft through the wound. His head thrust high up and he gave utterance to a short chuckling laugh, mirthless, death-defying. If die he must he would die like a man.

Up out of the water and on to the opposite bank they fought. He was reeling from exhaustion and his breath came in choking wheezes into the straining lungs. Yet he dodged the constant death-thrusts at the instant they were launched, causing them to be deflected in the tiny space that meant life instead of death. He stumbled and half-sank down. His groping hands clutched gold, two of the largest nuggets. Savage yells went up as they bore him down.

Again the great head shook convulsively. The giant body trembled in mighty thrills of supreme effort. Slowly from beneath the tossing pack he strained upright. Blows were rained upon him that beat blood and sparks of fire into his eyes. Throttling hands seized at his throat. The frothing lips opened. He added his powerful jaws to the fray, snapping hands and crushing wrists in a spinning semicircle that brought yowls of pain from his foes. He forged backward a pace, seeking room in which to move his hands, his arms, the missiles that he clutched.

Swoosh! The two hands raised high. The yellow nuggets glowed for a single instant at the zenith of their ascent. Crack! Crunch! The deadly missiles crashed through the skulls and into the brains of the nearest pair of Indians. Hot blood spurted upon his hands. The two forms fell at his feet and thrashed the ground in a quivering death agony. He seized other nuggets.

The crowd forced forward and wavered. He was at their faces with a leap, battering heads and faces into pulp, dancing upon the forms of the struggling dead while he beat the living into oblivion. Some started to run and he hurled missles of gold that snapped necks and broke spines, masses of metal heavier than lead hurled with demoniac rage and swiftness.

Four Jiveros remained on their feet, huddling together and whimpering. The prospector dashed up to them and raised his hands to strike death to their cowering frames. They fell flat on their faces, arms extended, bawling like children. The American gave a deep grunt of derision. The men lay quiet. He fetched a pack-rope and knotted it around each of the four necks. Then kicking lustily and yanking on the rope he brought the Jiveros to their feet.

With many gestures to the trembling men he commanded them to gather up the piles of gold and make it into loads for themselves. Then he began searching among the fallen bodies of their former comrades for the larger of the nuggets he had used for weapons. Having collected these he went to his blanket roll and began cutting his two blankets into coverings for the packs. With bits of rope and bow-thongs the heavy cargoes of gold were

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bound into loads for the backs of the four captives.

Four days later a strange caravan staggered down the street of a Peruvian coast town. Dogs barked, children cried and men and women followed at a respectful distance. It paused at the American consul's door and the consul thrust his head out and gaped curiously. He was startled almost out of his wits to hear the leader of this caravan, a half-clothed creature with wild red hair and bushy beard, address remarks to him in the familiar mother-tongue of his native land.

A BIG NIGHT FOR SLEEPY

By Thomson Burtis

Author of "The Winning Chance," "The Lucky Crash," etc.

SEVERAL weeks after "Sleepy" Spears and little Al Johnson, pilots of the mechanics' school at Donovan Field, finished their big night's work, Tex MacDowell arrived at the school from McMullen to take the engineering course. The big Texan met Spears for the first time and a few days afterward remarked—

"If the sun even passes behind a cloud, Sleepy shows signs of life!"

Which was about the truth. Sleepy was the most humorous, lovable, least understood character among the flyers of Donovan Field, from the day of his arrival. He was short, stocky, slow; he acted as if he was about to crumple with fatigue all the while between sun-up and dark. His square, sunburnt countenance was perpetually decorated with a wide grin that made friends for him on sight, but of energy he had none. That is, during the day. When evening fell Spears woke up. He would dash wildly around at the last minute to get dressed for a sortie on San Antonio, frequently chasing the bus with his blouse in one hand and his hat in another, finishing his preparations while the truck was covering the four miles to town. He was never known to be on time.

Should one who knew him catch sight of Lieutenant Spears, of the Air Service, in town that night Sleepy would be almost unrecognizable. Eyes sparkling, face beaming, he was the antithesis of the lackadaisical, sleepily good natured, totally pepless individual one laughed at—or more frequently with—during the day.

Two days after he reported for duty at the mechanic's school a group of flyers were discussing him on the veranda of the long building which housed the bachelor officer's quarters. Garry Hinton, from field two, happened to be there.

"Spears? Not Sleepy Spears?" he inquired.

"I don't know," replied tiny Al Johnson, who had succeeded Jerry Carter as engineer officer and chief test pilot of the school, "But that name Sleepy sure fits him."

"Was he overseas—went over there as a cadet early in the war?" Hinton asked eagerly.

"That's the man," stated "Slim" Evans,

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who was leaning his six-feet-four of skin-and-bones against a handy post.

"Greatest guy in the world!" grinned Hinton. "Wanders around all day as though every step would be his last, doesn't he?"

"I'll say he does," laughed Slim. "If he ever stubbed his toe he'd fall over backward!"

"I knew him out at May Field in California," Hinton went on. "He's a flyer that can make you hold your breath oftener than any man I ever saw."

"Not another Dumpy Scarth?" asked Johnson in mock terror. Dumpy Scarth was a wonderful flyer and an even more wonderful talker, stationed with the Marfa Flight of the border-patrol.

"Oh no. But he flys like he acts all day —as though he didn't know anything at all about what he was doing. But he always gets there, as you'll notice after you've known him a while. And he can't be bothered about anything."

Hinton suddenly burst out laughing.

"He used to take an S. E. 5 at May Field and fly through an empty hangar every once in a while—he's the craziest guy in a ship I ever saw. One day somebody closed the big folding-doors at one end of the hangar and Sleepy never noticed it. He dove down and popped the S. E. through the open end. Of course he rammed through the closed doors at the other end, sheered off his wings, and ended up against the side wall of the next hangar in the worst smashed-up ship I ever looked at. So help me, there wasn't a square foot of linen or a twelve-inch piece of wood left. The motor was a heap of junk. How Sleepy got out of it I don't know, and neither does he. A bunch of us got there as he was picking himself out of the kindling. He dusts himself off, and looks at the hole he'd made in the hangar doors.

" 'I knew those blokes would have that door closed some day,' he says, and rambles away as calm as ever."

Every man could picture Spears doing just that and a gale of mirth rewarded Hinton.

"Funniest duck I ever knew," remarked Johnson. "Have you-all noticed all those big boxes he's got piled in his room?"

"They're correspondence school courses," chuckled Hinton. "He has sent for every correspondence school layout I know of, from banking to pig-breeding. I knew him three months at May Field, and I know of two boxes of mail-order education he never even opened. Every once in a while he gets ambitious, but it soon wears off."

At that point in the conversation Sleepy himself strolled around the corner, campaign hat on one side to shade his eyes from the late afternoon sun. His O. D. shirt was open at the neck, and he was dragging his black necktie behind him in the dirt with negligent unconcern. His wide mouth stretched farther in the already well-known Spears' smile.

"How do you boys get up pep enough to add hot air to the overheated atmosphere of this —— bake-oven of a State?" he inquired, flopping on the edge of the veranda with a soulful sigh. "Texas in the Summer would be cooled by a breeze blowing straight from ——."

"We were just wondering how you found time to study all those canned college courses you've got piled in your room," replied Hinton.

"Why hello, Garry," exclaimed Spears, almost getting vivacious as he turned around and stretched out his hand to the reclining Hinton. "Knew you were here at Donovan, but hadn't got up ambition enough to look you up."

"You wouldn't pick up a ten-spot if you had to bend over to get it, Sleepy," laughed Hinton.

Spears sank back on the veranda floor, hands behind his head and yawned.

"Your subjects of conversation are too heavy, as usual," he said. "I can't be bothered arguing about either money or education."

He might have added any other topics that entered his mind, for after a month of close acquaintance nobody, from Major Stratton, the C. O., down to Al Johnson, Sleepy's roommate, could discover anything that Spears could be bothered about. He spent three days, immediately after he was assigned in charge of the airplane department, in carefully training his office men to sign his name to reports so that the signature would look like his own. He found an expert and experienced staff of instructors and clerks, made a few suggestions, watched them work a few days, and after making certain that everything was running like clockwork failed to spend over an hour a day on the job.

"And the worst of it is," opined Major

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Stratton to Captain Adams, his adjutant, "that the son-of-a-gun has got the smoothest working outfit in the school!"

Captain Adams grinned; nearly every one did when Spears' name was mentioned.

"He taught every non-com just what his job was, and now all he does is rove down through the airplane instruction hangar, drop into every class five minutes, bawl out the instructor for the slightest thing in that likable way of his, and then go his way. And Jim, the airplane riggers he's turning out would knock your eyeballs loose. His sergeants and instructors are working like —— for him. I don't know how he does it."

"Well, what we want is results, and as long as he gets 'em I'll let him sleep on," decided the major.

Sleepy's flying was just as characteristic. Al Johnson, who soon became Spears' bosom companion, maintained that Sleepy was the only aerial comedian in the army. He handled a ship as if he neither knew nor cared what he was doing; grazing roofs, just banking in time to miss a flagpole, and frequently taking off in a series of dizzy zigzags that invariably caused flyers who did not know him to curse fervently and stop breathing for several seconds.

When the quartermaster mules got loose, as they occasionally did, and overran field one it was a sight for the gods to see Sleepy herd them from the air. He invariably ran them for miles, circling and dipping behind them until they were far from home. Cursing Q. M. sergeants rounded them up, called on high Heaven to take vengeance—and took special pains thereafter that the mules should stay where they belonged instead of endangering the necks of unwary flyers trying to land amidst live stock.

Within a few minutes after Sleepy took the air for the first time he was rated a real pilot. Slim Evans and Al Johnson and Major Stratton and the rest knew a flyer when they saw one, and Spears' aerial clowning did not fool them. As a matter of fact, Hinton's prophecy that Spears would become highly respected for his ability to "get there" came true, although no one could quite understand why they thought Spears capable of handling a little more than his share of anything that came up.

"I would like to see you actually working your head off some day, Sleepy," Al Johnson told him one night. "If you really got into action, I believe you might be good!"

As it happened, Sleepy did get into action, and Al had a grand-stand seat, or the next thing to it.

MAJOR STRATTON summoned the two roommates to his office one afternoon, telling them nothing over the phone except that he wanted to see them immediately.

"Have chairs," he said genially when the two pilots reported. "How would you like to fly down to Kannville tomorrow, stay a couple of days, and give exhibitions at the fair and race-meet they're having down there?"

"Suits me fine, major," responded Johnson, his black eyes sparkling at the prospect. He was a wonderful stunt pilot, and it had fallen to his lot frequently to give exhibitions in adjoining towns. He knew that a good time always awaited an army flyer who was assigned on that duty, and further more a very charming young woman of his acquaintance lived in Kannville.

"How about you, Spears?" asked the major.

"I'd like it, sir."

"You ought to have a good time. Mr. Shaler, who is head of the fair committee, is a good friend of mine, and he writes me that not only is the fair to be the biggest they have ever had, but that all the profits this year are to be turned over to the Red Cross. You can land on the race-track—they're going to have races, of course, but the crowd on the inside of the track will be roped in and a good-sized landing-place left for you. I have talked with both Colonel Mills and Colonel Feldmore, the Department Air Service officer, and they are agreeable to sending a couple of planes down there. In addition, they have given permission to take up the two girls who have sold the most tickets for the fair, in view of its charitable nature.

"Another thing. They would very much like to have a parachute jump staged. Both of you have jumped, I know, but don't feel obliged to do it unless you want to. What do you think?"

"I'd just as soon," replied Spears, and Johnson likewise signified his willingness to jump. A course in parachutes—their construction, folding and operation—had recently been inaugurated in the mechanics'

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school, the work falling under Spears' department. A parachute jump was included for all who wished to take it, and every flyer in the mechanics' school had made at least one jump.

"In that case, you can toss up to see who pilots the ship and who jumps," suggested the major. "Take Sergeant Cox as one of the mechanics, of course, to handle the 'chutes and see that they're properly folded, and so forth."

Spears nodded. Cox was the non-commissioned officer who had been sent north to the experimental field of the Army Air Service to take special instruction in parachute work, and was now chief instructor of that department in the mechanics' school.

"You can pick your own mechanic, Johnson," the C. O. went on. "What they want down there is this: Take off so as to arrive around two o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Give a fifteen-minute exhibition before you land. The next afternoon you can take up the two prize-winning girls, and then give another exhibition—you can figure out something a little different like combination acrobatics, maybe. Then the third afternoon—Saturday—you can pull the jump. Mr. Shaler will put you both up and he will also see that the two mechanics are fixed up. They've got a big carnival down there this year in connection with the fair, and they'll have an awful crowd if the weather holds good—going to have a regular Wild-West rodeo, too. I'll phone Shaler now and give him all the dope.

"Oh, by the way. You might tell Cox and whoever else you pick to go, to do a little Air Service recruiting if they have a chance. And another thing——

The major paused a moment and looked at Spears appraisingly.

"You being new to Texas, Spears, I'll say this. Kannville is right in the ranch country, and probably the rodeo and so forth will attract a lot of folks from the backwoods, so to speak, in addition to the regular carnival hangers-on and the ordinary crowd of townspeople. Kannville is fairly rough, anyway—not old-time Wild-West stuff or gunmen, I don't mean, but quite a bit of gambling, drunkenness and lawlessness. You and Johnson must be particularly careful not to get inveigled into anything that would lead to consequences. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Have a good time, but watch your step. Johnson, you'll know what ships to take—I would suggest Jennys with H motors."

"Yes, sir, I think they'll be the best for that purpose," the little engineer officer replied. They saluted and went out as the major reached for the phone and put in a call for Kannville."

"We'll sure have a time, Sleepy," exulted Johnson. "I've given exhibitions at a dozen of these fairs during the war when I was stuck as an instructor, and I've had some large week-ends doing it, too."

Spears didn't enthuse much verbally, but he nodded slowly and grinned widely. As they walked down the road they were in deep discussion over just what combination acrobatics they would be. In order for two ships to accomplish the same stunts in perfect unison arrangements must be careful and detailed ahead of time.

"We'll talk it over some more tonight," said Al as he turned into his office in the end of a hangar. "I'll see that the ships are ready and you tend to the 'chutes and notify Cox what's up. I'll take Correll, I think."

AT ONE o'clock the next afternoon the two planes were warmed up and ready to go. Two parachutes, securely folded and wrapped, were wired on the wing of Spears' ship. On the other wing was his suitcase. Johnson's ship carried the bags of the other three men, wired snug against the fuselage.

Sergeant Correll, seasoned veteran of twenty-seven years in the army, climbed out of the front cockpit of Johnson's idling ship. Cox was already in his place in the rear cockpit of the other plane, which was also idling gently.

"I've warmed them both up, sir," Correll reported to Johnson, who was fastening his helmet. "Both running O. K."

"All right—jump in," directed Al. "It's lucky I've got all those suitcases on the wing to make her nose-heavy. Every time I fly you I wear my arm out trying to keep the nose down."

The grizzled, somewhat portly old sergeant grinned at this comment on the difference in their sizes. Correll, who had been a mechanic in the first aero squadron the army ever had, was a huge figure of a man and Al Johnson was the smallest flyer on

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Donovan Field. He was not an inch over five feet two, and weighed about half as much as the six-foot sergeant.

Spears, his belt securely fastened and his goggles over his eyes, slowly thrust the throttle forward. He nodded contentedly as the motor purred smoothly at all speeds, finally cutting it back to idling so that the mechanics who had been holding the wings could pull the wheel-blocks. He looked at the other ship, the front cockpit of which was still unoccupied while Al was giving some last directions to his chief mechanic, who would be in charge of the engineering department while Johnson was absent. Spears leaned back in his cockpit languidly, watching the score of ships that were droning through the air above Donovan Field.

To his right as he sat facing field one, the field was lined with nondescript looking planes in all stages of deshabille. There were fuselages without wings, in which students in the motor department were installing motors. There were other planes with only one wing on, or lacking tail assemblies. Rigging students flocked busily around these ships, their instructors roving from student to student, occasionally stopping work to deliver a two-minute lecture to the whole class when some man ran into a knotty problem.

In the immediate vicinity of Spears' ship a miscellaneous group of single-seaters, bombers and training-planes were lined up. These were the engineering department planes, used for regular flying. At frequent intervals ships taxied out and took off, or landed and rolled up to the line as the officers of the school got in their daily stint of air work.

Sleepy straightened up as Al Johnson's motor roared wide open. The little pilot left his motor open for a minute, the ship straining against the blocks. Then he waved at Sleepy, nodding to the mechanics at the same time. They pulled the blocks, and Spears taxied slowly toward the end of the field behind the other ship. They turned, and side by side took off.

Sleepy deigned to glance at his instruments briefly. Oil, air and rotations per minute were all satisfactory, and the high compression, hundred and eighty horsepower motor—a famous French-American development that had proved its worth in a thousand battles over the lines—purred evenly and without vibration. His ship was a sturdy training-plane, made faster and more pleasant to fly by the installation of a combat motor. The famous "Jenny" type of plane is comparatively slow beside a scout or a modern bomber, but is correspondingly easier to land and harder to wreck than the faster landing, more lightly constructed service ships.

Spears kept a hundred feet behind Al as the two ships circled the greatest flying-field in the country—perhaps in the world. Field two, its northern rim marked by a straight line of twenty-four one hundred-foot hangars, was dotted by a dozen different ships that scurried across its square mile of green like bugs. The bombardment and pursuit groups, formed of several squadrons each, occupied field two. Adjoining it, with only a road between, field one stretched north and south. The two fields in combination formed a vast, trim-looking base for flying activity. Hangars, machine-shops, barracks and living-quarters stretched in long, scrupulously correct lines, gleaming white in the sun.

When the altimeter was showing two thousand feet Al turned southeast, picked up the railroad that ran to the Gulf of Mexico, and started on the course for Kannville, sixty miles down. Spears looked at his map, and counted the towns. Kannville was the sixth one. Then he turned to Sergeant Cox and shook the stick. Cox, his deeply tanned countenance split by a delighted smile, took the stick in the back seat and the pilot felt his feet on the rudder.

Cox could handle a ship in the air all right, and it was a treat for him to get an opportunity to do it.

Spears waved toward Johnson's plane, now a few hundred feet in the lead, and Cox nodded. Sleepy settled back in the cockpit, his arms propped comfortably on the cowl and his feet resting on the board flooring. There were plenty of forced landing-fields along the railroad, the motor was working comfortably, and Johnson knew the route well. Cox could follow him. He closed his eyes, and with the roar of the motor sounding in his ears fell into a doze which speedily drifted into sleep.

He was awakened by a powerful grip on his shoulder. Cox, leaning forward to reach him, was shaking him. Spears turned, and Cox pointed downward. The other plane was circling over a good sized town. Spears took the stick, throttled his motor

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slightly, and waited for Al to start stunting. He quickly picked up the race-track, grand-stand, and carnival tents on the eastern edge of the town. The inside edge of the track, toward the grand-stand, was packed ten deep with a solid mass of people. The lanes between the carnival tents were black with moving specks that gradually became motionless as every one stopped to watch the airplanes.

Five hundred feet below Spears Johnson started to stunt. Three loops in succession, and then a fast tail-spin with the motor half on took him a thousand feet earthward. He started a series of barrel rolls, so beautifully executed and in such quick succession that his ship looked as if it was doing a horizontal tail-spin. The onlookers below had no conception of the skill and knowledge of flying speed necessary to bring the ship out of one roll with speed enough to execute the next without a preliminary dive, but aerial acrobatics were wonderful enough to them without a complete knowledge of what they involved.

When he finished his rolls, Al was about three thousand feet high, and after a couple of Immelmann turns he sent his sturdy Jenny into the *pièce de résistance* of stunting—upside down work. He did not spiral, but with his motor cut went into a straight dive upside down. The wires shrilled so loudly that their high-pitched song could be plainly heard on the ground.

Spears, roosting nearly five thousand feet high, watched appreciatively. He saw Al dive out, and use his terrific speed to go into another loop. Sleepy estimated that his partner was only about a thousand feet high by this time, but Al went into three more loops. He was over the edge of the race-track, and after his fourth loop the ship cocked up in a vertical bank, lost speed in a side-slip, and finally scudded over the ground.

Down on the ground Al taxied to the end of the lane, where a huge straight-walled tent built against the race-track rail looked as if it might be meant for a temporary hangar. The ring of people who lined the inside rail of the track watched interestedly as he cut the motor and jumped out.

"Glad to see you, Al," shouted a loud voice, and Mr. Shaler, wealthy ranchman, came hurrying toward the ship. Miss Betty Shaler was an old friend of Al's, and he had made many a week-end cross-country trip to the Shaler ranch a few miles out of Kannville.

"Glad to be back," grinned Johnson. "Is this the stable for our Jennys?"

"Right you are. Some exhibition you gave. Betty is right over there in the grand-stand. You boys are going to watch the races from my box, I hope. At least, that's what——"

HE BROKE off suddenly as the drone of the motor above suddenly increased. Everybody on the ground looked up at Spears.

His ship was turning and twisting on itself in wild abandon. Al grinned with enjoyment. Sleepy was doing a falling leaf, garnished up considerably because he was leaving his motor wide open. This particular stunt makes a ship flutter, dive and twist downward apparently out of control, and people who do not know much about flying invariably believe the ship is doomed.

Sleepy had his stick pulled back against his seat, the throttle fully open. This caused the ship to nose up almost straight in the air. Right rudder, and it fell off to the right in a sickening drop sideward and downward. Like a flash the pilot gave it full left rudder. Having picked up speed through the dive, the nose again came high in the air and then fell off to the left.

The stunt is almost always done with the motor off, but with it going full the dives became fast as lightning, and the twisting of the ship so fast that it did not seem as if wood and wire and cloth could stand the strain. Five thousand people almost ceased to breathe as the ship above them fluttered downward like a tortured live thing.

A thousand—two thousand feet, and still it was alternately diving and then zooming, sometimes almost going on its back as the nose came up. Even Al became uneasy as the ship came lower. Was it possible that Sleepy was really out of control of the ship? At twenty-five hundred feet the ship went completely on its back, and then fell off. Once it did a one-turn spin, and then like a flash the nose twisted upward, only to fall off to the right in a one-turn spin the other way.

A growing murmur came from the crowd as the ship reached a thousand feet, still wobbling crazily all over the sky. A few women shrieked and men's faces became

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set as they watched the plane do a breath-taking dive of five hundred feet directly over the grand-stand on the northern edge of the track.

With wires whistling the Jenny banked, and still diving, sped down the track to the eastern end of the oval-shaped course. Headed away from the track, it went upward and to the right in a steep, two-hundred-foot climbing turn that left it almost motionless as it lost speed. Then it started to drop, right wing down. Gradually the nose came around, and finally the plane was headed down the landing-lane. The motor's roar decreased gradually and the ship settled to the ground on three points for a perfect landing.

Al, who had been a little worried up until the time the ship went into the first steep dive and then banked out, grinned at Mr. Shaler, who had been standing as if turned into stone.

"A few thousand people just had their first breath for about a minute, I guess," he remarked.

Mr. Shaler slowly drew out a handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"I'm among 'em," he stated as the ship came taxying toward them. "That beats all I ever did see for gettin' a man worked up."

Al and Sergeant Correll each took a wing of Sleepy's ship and helped him taxi it directly into one side of the tent hangar. The people on the inside of the track drifted up toward the hangar, which was at the western end of the oval, until the crowd was straining against the ropes.

Sleepy cut his motor after idling it for a moment to cool it gradually, and raised his goggles. He turned to look at Sergeant Cox, who was still trying to regain his lost equilibrium in the back seat.

"Didn't bother you, did it?" he inquired with a grin.

"Considerable, lieutenant, considerable," admitted Cox.

"Boy, you sure had me sweatin' blood," boomed Mr. Shaler.

"Mr. Shaler, Sleepy Spears," Al cut in, and Sleepy leaned down from the cockpit to shake hands.

"If you were sleepy a minute ago, I'd sure like to see you real wide awake," laughed the ranchman. Sleepy grinned again and eased himself out of his seat and down to the ground, where he stretched comfortably. The pilots and their mechanics trundled Johnson's ship inside the hangar, and then accompanied their host toward the grand-stand, leaving Cox and Correll to groom the planes and make preparations for the morrow's flying.

As they walked down the landing-lane the crowd waiting for the races to start watched them curiously. Mr. Shaler towered a head above both of the pilots. Al Johnson was as small as he was short, but Sleepy was stocky and wide-shouldered. A close observer might have noted that beneath the slouchiness of his walk there was a certain smoothness that spoke of perfectly coordinated muscles hidden in the powerfully built body. Spears swung his helmet and goggles idly as he walked, appraising the crowd with as much interest as they showed toward him.

Large numbers of ornate cowboy boots, usually with the trousers of ordinary business suits tucked in them, were matched by large and variegated sombreros. Add a few flannel shirts instead of linen beneath the coats and one has completed the list of variations in dressing that would mark the crowd as a Texas gathering. There were practically no women on the inside of the track, but the grand-stand across the way was a riot of color.

Meanwhile Correll and Cox prepared to fix up the ships for the night. They were just removing their blouses when a tall, lanky man in blue flannel shirt, straw sombrero and boots strolled into the big tent. He was followed by two other men, similarly dressed.

The leader swaggered in, and relieved his mouth of a considerable amount of tobacco juice. He looked around for a moment, and then started to climb up on a wing for a look at the cockpit.

"Sorry, pardner, but you'll have to stay off there," said Correll.

"Oh, I will, will I?" returned the interloper, and deliberately winked at one of his followers.

"Yes, you will!" returned Correll truculently. He did not like the looks of the man, whose long horse-face was given a distinctly unpleasant cast by mean-looking, close-set eyes, and his actions bore out the impression.

The tall intruder surveyed the army man contemptuously. Correll was standing close beside him now.

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"Who is gonna make me?" he inquired, and his two followers laughed.

"I am!" snapped the burly sergeant, and his ham-like fist landed flush on the elongated nose of the other man. It was a beautiful smack, as Cox afterward said, and the booted and spurred recipient thereof measured his length on the ground.

Before Cox and the other two could limber up for action two special policemen arrived in the van of a curious crowd who had swamped the ropes. The deputies took the other two men in charge as their leader, striving to stanch the blood that streamed from his nose, picked himself up. His face was vicious, but he was unable to talk for the moment.

"Now look here," began one of the policemen when a bull-like voice outside suddenly shouted:

"Make way, please! Let us through. Get back behind the ropes!"

Mr. Shaler and the two flyers broke through the crowd, which began to drift back toward the track rail reluctantly.

"What happened?" demanded the three new arrivals breathlessly, and Cox and Correll told the meat of the story in succinct phrases.

"So I knocked him off," Correll finished.

"And a —— good job you did, sergeant," grinned Mr. Shaler.

He turned toward Correll's victim, and his expression changed.

"As for you, Hawkins, and your two low-down, hooch-drinking, cheap-skate hangers-on, you get to —— out of this town and stay out till the fair is over. Kannville has had all it's going to stand of your sneaking, dirty troublemaking. We've warned you and we've warned your skunk of a boss that the next time we catch you at any of your devilment around here you're gonna get it, so now take your medicine. Now git!"

Hawkins sent a venomous look at Correll, who returned it with interest. Then the three slouched out, Hawkins still nursing a flowing nose.

"They work on the Belmore place, about twenty-five miles out," said Mr. Shaler as the three made their way toward the grandstand for the second time. "Hank Belmore is a bad actor, and can't keep a good man working for him. He's as low-down a lying booze-hound and crook as ever ran an imitation ranch. Hawkins has been in trouble before around here. He's as pleasant as a rattlesnake, and he's got the disposition of a coyote, as far as nerve is concerned. He runs to sneaking meanness, unless he's drunk. He has got a little whisky nerve then."

The noise of hurdy-gurdies, merry-go-rounds, and carnival spielers grew in volume as they approached the grandstand. When they crossed the track a ripple of applause greeted them from the overflowing seats. The ranchman removed his tremendous white Panama and creased the coat of his immaculate Palm Beach suit in a low bow.

"They ain't got hats, so I'll take their bows!" he roared jovially.

Renewed applause and laughter greeted this sally. As the two flyers followed their host through the crowd lining the rail in front of the stands Sleepy whispered to Al:

"The old boy appears to be about ninety per cent. of this town, don't he? And do you see the fair damsel yonder?"

Al didn't answer, for he was engaged in waving and smiling at the vivacious, dark-haired little beauty Spears had indicated. Johnson finally turned to Spears as they followed their host up the grand-stand steps.

"You note that I see her," he said loftily. "Furthermore, I shall be chagrined, not to say grouchy, if she is able to see you at all. That's Betty Shaler."

"Good. I just mentioned the dark-haired one because she's nearest the aisle. I wanted to call attention to the creamy blonde behind her," retorted Spears in a whisper, for they were approaching the box.

"Girls, the aviators!" boomed Mr. Shaler. "Al you all know. Mrs. Shaler, Betty Shaler and Virginia Evers, meet Sleepy Spears! And Virgy, after watching this boy fly, it is my opinion as an old has-been that you'd better watch your step. If his name is Sleepy, mine oughta be Pee-wee!"

THAT evening there was a joyous dinner-party with the Shalers, and Sleepy was belying his cognomen successfully while entertaining the creamy blonde. Some very good cocktails had been produced from the Shaler treasure-chest, and as the editor of the Kannville *Herald* would have said, a good time was being had by all. Later the party would go down to patronize the carnival.

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The telephone bell jangled as dessert was being served. Mr. Shaler, who was a much-telephoned man while the fair was on, automatically got up and answered it before the negro maid could get to it.

"Yes, they are here," he said after the preliminary hello. He turned to Spears.

"They want you, lieutenant. I reckon it's your sergeant there—one of 'em."

Spears excused himself and strolled into the hall, wondering what Cox or Correll could want with him.

"Hello. Yes, Lieutenant Spears talking."

His words were plainly understandable to the party around the dinner-table. Al listened intently.

"What? Tell me about it, quick!" came Spears' voice, and there was a change in the timbre of it that sent a sudden silence over the table.

For the next three minutes Spears only broke the silence to ask a few questions.

"Commandeer the first car and rush to the hangar, Cox," he ordered finally, and hung up. As he entered the dining-room the others looked at him in questioning wonder. His square, good-natured face had lost its smile and there were new, hard lines in it. The jaw was outthrust, his eyes cold and hard. His wide shoulders were thrown back a trifle. The whole impression was that of strength held in leash by iron will.

"It was Cox," said Spears deliberately. "Those three roughnecks Correll had a run-in with, and another chap who drove a big, light-blue Speedplex car, set on Cox and Correll on the outskirts of town. They captured Correll and drove him away with them, telling Cox they were going to tar and feather the sergeant. Cox started to fight again and they knocked him out. He just came to and got to a telephone. They were going west."

Mr Shaler, his face black with wrath, leaped to his feet with a bellow of rage.

"That Belmore bunch, and Van Secord!" he roared. "And they're bound for that cabin on the river right by Hank's big cotton-field. Lizzie!"

"Yessah!" quavered the maid. "Ise——"

"Tell Jim to get the car— "

"Just a minute, please, Mr. Shaler," interrupted Spears in that curiously detached voice, and the raging ranchman did not finish his order.

"Is that the big plowed field over by the river that I noticed—runs north and south along the river-bank?"

"That's it. The cabin is right on the river-bank. Those skunks have been up to devilment there before, and I know—well that's where they're bound if they went west. Why, by——"

"Here's my idea, Mr. Shaler. Al, see what you think of it. You saw the field, of course?"

Al nodded silently. The little flyer's black eyes were flashing and his face flushed. Old Sergeant Correll had the respect and admiration of every officer on Donovan Field, and the thought of him in the hands of Hawkins and his henchmen, the victim of an ignominous coat of tar and feathers, had thrown his chief into a mood that boded ill for Correll's persecutors. He was quivering like a leaf as he held himself in leash to listen to the suddenly transformed Spears.

"That Speedplex can beat any car in town, I take it," Spears went on. "I don't know why the driver horned in on the deal——"

"Sweet on Betty—jealous of Al here," interjected Mr. Shaler, and not even the girls took any notice of the old man's frank estimate of the situation.

"The thing happened an hour ago. By this time they are there—providing that is their destination. It's twenty miles over there, air-line. If we can get there in half an hour, we can probably save Correll and get them quick. The parachutes are ready. So are the ships. The field is big and soft and the air smooth. We can take off, get pretty high, glide with the motor quiet toward the shack, and one of us jump for the field. The ship will still be high enough so that it can glide far enough afterward to avoid warning them too much when the motor goes on again. I'll make the jump, because Al is a better pilot. Besides, he's flown at night and I never have. I can sneak to the shack with a gun without their knowing it. If they have a lookout, he'll be some distance from the cabin to give them a chance to run. I can probably sneak up to the cabin without giving any warning."

While he was talking Spears was divesting himself of his blouse and white stock. Al, quickly taking in the plan, prepared for action likewise. He slipped out of the room

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and ran up-stairs for their flying-clothes.

"I believe, it's the quickest way, but my ——, son——"

"No danger to it, Mr. Shaler. It was done dozens of times to drop spys behind the lines during the war. A car would be too late, or else would make so much noise they'd get away. If they're mean enough to shoot, they'd have the drop."

Al returned, and the two quickly donned coats and helmets.

"I'll be on the way with a carload of help," roared Mr. Shaler. "I'll be there an hour from now, with a section of —— on wheels that they'll remember!"

Johnson handed Spears his Colt as the ranchman started out.

"I'll rush you over to the field first," the big Texan yelled from the doorway, and ran down the veranda steps, yelling for Jim, the colored factotum around the Shalers' Kannville home.

Betty began to cry softly, and Miss Virginia Evers was very silent as the two flyers silently adjusted their goggles and buttoned the leather coats.

The motor of the Shaler car could be heard outside now, and the two flyers started out. Spears, still dangerously calm and quiet, turned for a moment at the door to face the three women, who were speechless at the thought of what their guests were about to do to save Correll.

"Don't get worried, please," he remarked casually and ran out to the car.

A dizzy two minutes through the crowded streets around the carnival grounds, which were close by the Shaler home, and then the car bounced over a shallow ditch and on to the race-track. It drew up opposite the tent hangar. Shadowy figures had already pushed one plane out, and Cox could be heard urging them on. When Spears had told him to rush to the field he had divined the plan and knew the desperate need of haste.

The flyers climbed out and the car roared away toward town. The carnival, back of the grand-stand, lightened the sky overhead, but around the hangar it was very dark. The murmur and laughter of a happy crowd, undertoning the high-pitched noises of a fair, came plainly through the night as the two army men leaped the fence and ran around to the front of the hangar.

"Are the parachutes ready, Cox?"

"Yes, sir."

Cox came running with one, all folded and ready. Al ran toward the plane as Cox started strapping the harness under Spears' arms. As he skilfully fastened the pack on his chief's back Cox repeated his story in jerky sentences.

"I hope to —— you get down all right and that you're in time, lieutenant," gasped the sergeant as he gave a last look at the 'chute, now only a square pack on the back of the flyer. The harness, fastening around the body under the arms, was fastened securely and Cox knew the 'chute was folded rightly. The motor of the Jenny suddenly started.

"For a wonder, the self-starter worked!" Cox exclaimed joyfully.

"Good old Al didn't lose any time, did he?" queried Spears. Rapidly his hands slipped over the fastenings and felt for the rip-cord. Everything was right.

He climbed into the rear cockpit and leaned over to yell in Johnson's ear,

"Fly straight and level—I can't take time to unloosen this —— belt to strap myself in."

THE parachute on his back caused him to sit so far forward in the ship that the belt would not go around him without loosening, and in the dark it was too long a job. Al nodded silently, and peered ahead. There seemed no signs of life in the blackness, and he slowly pushed on the throttle. The tail came up and they hurtled across the ground into the darkness.

It was an almost desperate chance they were taking. The motor had not been warmed up sufficiently, and might cut out. If it did, it meant simply go ahead, blindly, into whatever was before them. Probably it would mean a crash into the stables. Even more dangerous, because more certain, was the landing that would eventually have to be made. Feeling for the ground in the darkness at fifty miles an hour, which was the "Jenny's" landing speed, is not a restful occupation, even in a large and well-known field. Cox would have some lights around the field, however, which would make it a little easier.

As they took the air it became suddenly easier to fly. The carnival lights, and the winking points of yellow from the town itself, made it easy to get bearings. The horizon was discernible, as it is from the air

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on any clear night. It is not hard to handle a ship in the air at night, unless it be foggy, when it is almost impossible. But landing at night is as nervy and skilful a bit of flying as any pilot dares tackle, unless specially built searchlights are provided.

The air was smooth and cool, and the stars were clustered thickly above the circling ship. The horizon was lightening a trifle as the moon started over the edge. Below them the ground was dimly discernible, even where there were no lights. Fields could be seen, although there was no means of telling whether there were ditches or rough spots in them. Plowed land gleamed white as snow.

Al turned eastward, and climbed as fast as he dared, on full throttle. He kept away from the district where the shack was to prevent the four captors from hearing the motor. Both airmen listened with almost sickening intensity to the steady drum of their eight-cylinder motor which was being shamefully mistreated. It had not been properly warmed up and now was working at cruel speed as it steadily pulled the ship upward, but it did not miss.

Five thousand feet in eight minutes—and Al turned west, slowly throttling the motor. They dived gradually over Kannville, and at over a hundred miles an hour started for the river and the field. The nose was slightly down, the motor turning twelve hundred. Al noted with satisfaction that it was not cooling too fast—the thermometer gage crept down slowly. Five miles from the river the motor's roar died down still more as Al cut it to a thousand revolutions. He kept looking backward at the lights of Kannville to keep his direction.

They were only a little over four thousand feet high when the silver gleam of the river was discernible ahead. Then Al cut both throttle and switch, and as silently as a ghost the ship glided slowly toward the point of light that marked the shack. It was easily picked up because it was the only building within two miles. The fact that there was a light in it bore out Mr. Shaler's surmise about the scene of Sergeant Correll's punishment for hitting Hawkins, because ordinarily there would be no occupants at night.

Spears stood up in the cockpit and carefully raised himself until he was squatting on his heels on the seat. His face was like granite, and within him the slow wrath that had come into being when Cox had told him his story over the phone was now an all-consuming flame. As he looked below, his narrowed eyes plumbing the darkness to the vague earth below, he was not conscious of the stark fear that grips even the most iron-nerved airman as he poises for a leap into nothingness with only a pack on his back that is supposed to open.

They were less than half a mile from the field and the shack now, gliding as slowly as was possible and still maintain flying-speed. The song of the wires was scarcely discernible in the dead silence. The propeller turned lazily in the air stream. The motor was silent, although ever-busy valves and tappets moved slowly as the propellor turned. Spears hooked both elbows over the cockpit and climbed to the little step on the outside of the fuselage. His right forefinger hooked itself in the ring of the rip-cord on his breast. He waited for a few seconds, and then Al, his head just topping the sides of the front cockpit, turned around. Spears nodded. They were at the edge of the field.

Suddenly the ship's nose came up, and for just an instant it hovered almost motionless in the air. Spears leaped, his finger in the ring. Even as he rushed through the darkness for perhaps two seconds he was conscious of a detached sort of surprize that held no fear. He felt his forward speed, generated by the moving ship, lessen and that he was dropping. He pulled the rip-cord, and the released parachute snapped out above him.

There was a hard wrench as the air caught the 'chute and his body doubled up in the snap of the sudden cessation of speed. He looked up, and saw the vent closing slowly. When a parachute first opens there is a wide hole in the top that remains open, in order to lessen the pull as the air first catches the surface. As the 'chute keeps dropping this hole, or vent, gradually closes by means of elastic cords which pull it together slowly, until finally the full surface of the big silk umbrella is effective. The speed downward diminishes until it is about fifteen feet a second.

Swinging slightly, although the air was still, the 'chute and its passenger dropped through the darkness. The ship was out of sight somewhere, but the motor was not yet on. Spears saw that he was drifting

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slightly too far eastward toward the river, so he slipped his 'chute in the opposite direction by pulling on the cords that ran from the edges of the parachute itself to the harness around his chest. This pulled one side down and caused him to drop faster but in the right direction. He did not want to land too near the cabin, so he kept slipping slightly until he was well over the middle of the field.

There was no sign of any one on the outside of the cabin, but in the light of the moon, which was now well out, he could make out what he thought was an automobile near the hut. He found time to worry about Johnson—there was no sound of a motor. It was just like Al, Sleepy reflected, to glide until he was scraping the tree-tops before he turned on the motor. He had jumped at three thousand feet—the ship would be three miles away before Al turned on the motor, anyway, and perhaps the motor would not be audible, although it was silent as he dropped like a twentieth-century ghost through the purple shadows.

At three hundred feet he began to be conscious that he was dropping. Previously it had been almost impossible to realize it, because the ground below scarcely seemed to change. He had a knife in his pocket, and swiftly pressed it to make sure it was there. He raised his arms and grasped the lines from harness to 'chute on each side. He silently gave thanks that there was a light in the cabin by which to estimate his closeness to the ground. As he dropped almost even with it he loosened his muscles and suddenly pulled up with his arms, his legs doubling likewise to break the force of his drop.

THE ground was soft and he landed with no more shock than as if he had leaped off an eight-foot wall. The parachute crumpled down to one side. The still air was a blessing, for there was not enough breeze to fill the silk bag and drag him. He quickly opened his knife and slashed at the harness. He could not waste any time trying to free himself in the darkness. He cut his way free, and leaving the parachute where it was ran swiftly over the furrows toward the shack, three hundred yards away.

Coarse laughter came loudly to his ears as he neared the hut.

"All right, you ——, we're ready to trim you up!" shouted somebody with a drunken laugh.

Spears stole to the window, which was unshaded, and looked in. The three ranch-hands, Hawkins himself reeling slightly, were ripping the clothes off Correll, whose hands and feet were tied. A young fellow with a weak face, his eyes bloodshot from the effects of liquor, was urging them on. On a stove at one end of the shack was a huge, rusted boiler, and the smell of tar pervaded the air.

Correll's face was terrible in its blazing wrath. He was talking in bitter phrases, daring them to loose his hands and let him fight them all, until Hawkins struck him a cruel blow in the mouth.

Right then Spears, known far and wide as Sleepy, went berserk. He forgot his gun, forgot that the men inside might be armed. He knew nothing except that he wanted to fight with his bare hands. He ran around the shack and burst through the door like a small tornado. Before the completely dumfounded occupants could even speak his fist crashed full to Hawkins' jaw, and the leering cowman went down like a felled ox.

Another man leaped for the flyer, but a straight left sent him reeling to the wall. The third man picked up a chair and swung. Even as the chair went backward and upward for the blow Spears leaped over the fallen Hawkins, head down. His head caught the other man full in the stomach, an instant before the chair descended. It left the man's suddenly relaxed fingers and crashed into the boiler on the stove. Tar began to ooze from a hole in the side.

Young Secord had not moved. He was licking his lips in drunken surprize, but Spears' second victim, a powerfully built fellow with a tremendous scar on his face, leaped to the attack again. As Spears parried the blow he felt Hawkins stir between his feet. The third man was still gasping feebly on the floor.

A blow from the man with the scar caught Spears on the cheek, and drew blood.

"Look out, lieutenant!" roared Correll, helpless in his bonds. Instinctively Sleepy ducked, to avoid he knew not what. A stove-lid just grazed his head. It had been thrown by Secord, who had fallen to the floor making his throw.

Scar-face leaped astride the flyer's shoulders before he straightened, and they went to the floor on top of Hawkins, who had just

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started to come to. Secord and the other man leaped in eagerly.

Suddenly the door flew open again and little Al Johnson dived for the writhing, kicking, battling heap on the floor. His eye caught the heavy leg of the thrown chair, which had smashed against the boiler. It was sticky with tar, but Al grabbed it and sent it down on the head of the top man of the heap with cruel force. Scar-face subsided limply.

Before Al had a chance to use his weapon again, Spears, face a mass of blood and clothes half-torn off, struggled to his feet. A mighty swing sideward threw off the drunken Secord and sent him sprawling. With his right arm thus freed, the tottering airman sent his fist squarely into the contorted face of his last remaining assailant.

The man, still weak from the effects of the terrible stomach blow he had received a half-minute before, went down and Spears staggered against the wall just in time to escape the clutching arms of Hawkins, who had risen to his knees on the floor. The table-leg, wielded by Johnson, sent Hawkins to sleep again.

Johnson leaped over to his comrade and jerked the gun from the holster on Spears' hip.

The two men he had hit with the chair leg were dead to the world, but at the point of the gun he herded Secord and the other man into a corner. He released Correll, who was almost crying with rage because he had had to be a helpless looker-on.

"Tie 'em up, Correll," snapped Al.

He kept a wary eye and a ready gun-muzzle on the two men in the corner while the burly sergeant tied the hands and feet of Hawkins and the man with the scar. This used up the rope which had been previously used for Correll, but the sergeant went out to Secord's car and found enough more to truss up the other two men.

Spears was sitting on the floor, attempting to wipe the blood from his face with a torn sleeve, and making a poor job of it. Correll and Johnson succeeded in making him look a little more like a human being while they awaited the arrival of Mr. Shale and his aids.

"For the love of Mike, Sleepy, why didn't you use your gun?" asked Al. "Good ——, what a scrap that must have been!"

Sleepy, once again the smiling lounger of yore, grinned sheepishly."

"I got sore and lost all the sense I ever had. I saw 'em hit Correll when he was tied."

Al looked at Sleepy with dawning wonder. Never to his dying day would he forget the sight of him struggling to his feet, with crimsoned face and burning eyes, to shake off and floor two men with the last remnants of his failing strength. He looked at Correll and then at Sleepy. Spears was still sitting on the floor, head tilted back against the wall, eyes closed, a half-smile on his face.

"Lieutenant, that was a fight!" stated Correll.

"Uh huh. A good scrap," Sleepy agreed. "And now, you little, misguided, club-swinging pee-wee pilot, how did you get here?"

Al looked sheepish this time.

"Got to worrying about things and decided I'd better land and see the excitement. You don't think you can have all the fun, do you?"

"You landed at night, without lights, in an absolutely strange field?" inquired Sleepy severely.

"Yes, it was easy. The light here in the shack guided me to the ground pretty well," Al defended himself.

Correll and Sleepy said no more, but both men knew that flying skill and cold nerve could go no farther. The three relapsed into silence for a moment, and their four victims—those of them that were conscious—had no desire for conversation. Al finally broke the silence.

"When we get back to Donovan, Correll, there won't a —— soul believe us, but we can tell 'em we saw Sleepy wake up, can't we?"

The grizzled old non-com nodded.

"I'll say we can," he agreed.

The noise of a racing automobile motor sounded dimly in their ears. Mr. Shaler was nearing the shack, and nearing it fast. Al suddenly began to laugh.

"Sleepy, you couldn't have done it in the day-time!" he chuckled.

"Oh, shut up," grinned the battered flyer. "I'm sure glad the folks are here. We can get back and have that dessert, now!"

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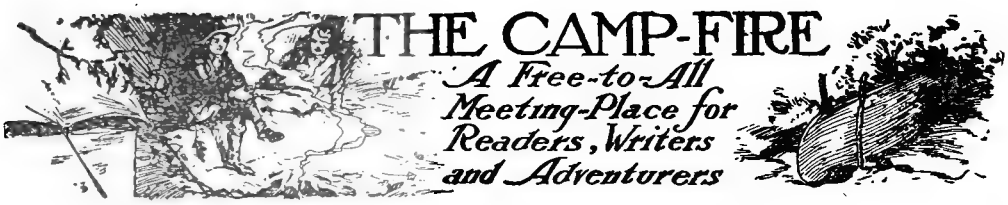

Our Camp-Fire came into being May 5, 1912, with our June issue, and since then its fire has never died down. Many have gathered about it and they are of all classes and degrees, high and low, rich and poor, adventurers and stay-at-homes, and from all parts of the earth. Some whose voices we used to know have taken the Long Trail and are heard no more, but they are still memories among us, and new voices are heard, and welcomed.

We are drawn together by a common liking for the strong, clean things of out-of-doors, for word from the earth's far places, for man in action instead of caged by circumstance. The *spirit* of adventure lives in all men; the rest is chance.

But something besides a common interest holds us together. Somehow a real comradeship has grown up among us. Men can not thus meet and talk together without growing into friendlier relations; many a time does one of us come to the rest for facts and guidance; many a close personal friendship has our Camp-Fire built up between two men who had never met; often has it proved an open sesame between strangers in a far land.

Perhaps our Camp-Fire is even a little more. Perhaps it is a bit of leaven working gently among those of different station toward the fuller and more human understanding and sympathy that will some day bring to man the real democracy and brotherhood he seeks. Few indeed are the agencies that bring together on a friendly footing so many and such great extremes as here. And we are numbered by the hundred thousand now.

If you are come to our Camp-Fire for the first time and find you like the things we like, join us and find yourself very welcome. There is no obligation except ordinary manliness, no forms or ceremonies, no dues, no officers, no anything except men and women gathered for interest and friendliness. Your desire to join makes you a member.

DANIEL BOONE'S rifle or rifles. Any of you know of any other specimens?

Holdrege, Nebraska.

I have just been reading in the magazine about a rifle that Daniel Boone carried, and which turned up in a town in southwest Wisconsin. While in Des Moines, Iowa, a year ago this Winter, I visited the Historical Building there and saw an old rifle, badly rusted and the stock rotted away, which was claimed as Daniel Boone's rifle, and which was found by some one, hidden in a hollow log, I believe, in Kentucky. It was a large bore gun with not such a very long barrel. Wonder how many rifles Daniel Boone had first and last and where the rest of them are?—A. G. LITTLE.

A COMRADE makes a suggestion—and sets an example—that I know you will endorse as heartily as I do. We've sent out quite a few copies of our magazine from this office to inmates of prisons, but, as you know, our supply of back copies is quickly used up and we can't meet the calls of our regular readers. Mr. Kraupa's plan, if followed by more of you, would bring quite a supply of reading to men who want it badly.

I'd like to add a plea, also, for soldiers and sailors still in hospital. We can't do too much for them, or miss any opportunity to show our appreciation of what they did for us. I'm writing to the War Department for a complete list of Army and Navy hospitals, also to the Canadian authorities for their list. We'll publish these lists later.

And of course don't limit your sending to our magazine. This is no circulation or advertising scheme on our part. We in the office send to hospitals or prisons the other magazines that come in to us, as well as our own.

Philadelphia.

Now here is what I do after I am through reading *Adventure*. I mail each magazine to the Eastern Penitentiary here in Philadelphia. The inmates are simply wild to read the stories. There are sixteen hundred inmates there and if some of your readers would send *Adventure* there or to some other institution where there are unfortunates, they would be surprised how these poor unfortunates "eat it up." Try this, boys, it's good fun.

Now for the past six years this is what I have done. I give three shows a week. Each Saturday I give about eight vaudeville acts from the best theaters, a five-reel feature and a comedy for the men. Some days I give a five-reel feature and several comedies for the women. On Wednesdays I give a show for the sick in this institution, shows lasting about four hours. All this gratis.

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They have two theaters, each complete with stage and scenery, in fact, just as good as many theaters in large cities. Figure sixteen hundred men marching into the theater with the tune of a large convict band. They are there on their honor, not a guard to watch them, and take it from me, they behave better than most audiences. They are in my charge. I am not connected there, and a better set of men and women can not be found together.

Warden McKenty approves all this. It makes good men and women. The papers prove that not more than eight per cent. are returned.

Now, boys, try the magazine racket. You will be surprized what good this means to unfortunates that are penned in for years.—EDWARD KRAUPA.

FOLLOWING Camp-Fire custom, J. P. Leland rises and introduces himself. His letter was written in connection with his first story in our magazine, "The Man-Eater," a tale of game-cocks, but reached us too late. So it comes to you along with his second, the story he speaks of intending to write.

How do the rest of you feel on the subject of killing? Personally I don't shoot at any bird or animal unless it be of the "varmint" class, a destroyer. I even find myself leaning more and more strongly toward the use of artificial bait in fishing—at least it prevents the torturing to death of minnows, frogs, and so on. I'm getting scared lest my blamed conscience make me give up fishing altogether and if it does I'll sit down and bawl.

Killing for needed food, of course, or killing for protection of self or property, isn't under discussion, but how do the rest of you feel about killing primarily for the sake of bagging game, any eating thereof being a secondary matter?

Mobile, Alabama.

I welcome the chance to speak to you across the Camp-Fire. I will be as brief as possible, but there are so many things that I would love to say that it will be a task to confine this little talk to a reasonable space.

FIRST, I have been an actor for over thirty years. I think a good one—*fortunately* not a prominent one. I make this statement with the full knowledge that success would have deprived me of more real happiness than it could have brought.

While most of my clan have followed the weary rounds of the Booking Agencies, my vacations have been spent in the mountains, in the deep woods, or on the river bank. While I might have bettered my condition, financially, by a different course, still I have gained some sweet memories that will never tarnish, and I have no regret.

I have hunted a great deal alone—I have never raved companionship other than that of a few congenial friends.

While there is much to be said of the West, still it is a country of such immense distances that the results do not compensate one for the hardships encountered.

I THINK that I have really enjoyed a Winter of hunting in Arkansas more than any of my numerous trips in different parts of the country. The year prior to the Spanish War I put in an entire Winter there. Many camping trips on White River. Deer were plentiful and all kinds of small game in abundance. The fox-hunts are never to be forgotten. We hunted at night, altogether; at least we would make our start at night, but usually run into the following day. We caught many gray fox, and a few reds—never tried to get them—we preferred to *listen*.

To us, a pack in full cry was not "some dogs barking;" it was a great chorus that filled the night with harmony. I have been present at some of the noted meets in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri; they were but gatherings of men and dogs—the poetry of solitude was missing.

ALL my life I have been a lover of game fowl. They represent the highest type of courage known to living things.

For years I have not fired a gun, and I sometimes grieve over the ruthless murders of the past. The helpless dwellers of the woods and fields need never fear me again. Outside the wild carnivora they are safe, as far as I am concerned, but when one of my old game-cocks has reached his allotted span of years, and it is impossible to pension him, he goes on his last journey as he would *want* to go, tasting with his last gasp the battle he has loved. This may seem paradoxical, but it is nevertheless humane according to my standards.

I hope you will like my story, "The Man-Eater." It reflects my views. The characters, both human and animal, are real. There is more of truth than fiction in it. Outside of the actual plot, it has all taken place. The characters will be recognized by some of you. They are some of the finest men that the South can produce.

Some of these days I want to tell you of those two old hounds, Old Ranter and Old Blue. I wish I could describe them to you as I would like—some day I'll try, and some of you will know.—J. P. LELAND.

ONE of our younger comrades wants to know about George Rouse and Henry Starr. Unless I'm mixed, we've already had some bits about Starr, but more are wanted.

Hodge, La.

This is the first time I have raised my voice at Camp-Fire, though I have been listening for years. I am glad you don't require a fellow to be a dyed-in-the-wool adventurer to come out of the shadows, for I have done most of mine in dreams. I am only twenty-two years old. I was on the Mexican border in '16 and in Mexico. I was advised, on the American side, to stay out of Mexico. That was reason enough for a seventeen-year-old boy to go in. Nothing worth mentioning happened to me.

I went in the Navy two weeks after we declared war in '17, was discharged for disability the same year, was in measles camp tent with three other

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fellows in Portsmouth, N. H. They went out with meningitis. Was about the most exciting thing happened to me there. I wish I was a great talker, but bet the rest of you don't.

I would like to know if any of you old-timers ever knew any one down on the Mexican border by the name of Henry Starr or George Rouse? They were there in the seventies. I would like very much to know if they are living and where?

With best wishes for the Camp-Fire, I will return to the shadows.—G. L. HARPER.

DON'T forget our annual vote by readers on the best stories published in *Adventure* for 1921. Be marking down your favorites as you go along. Any one can vote, the only requirement being that you have read the stories you vote for. Vote only on stories published in the issues from that for January 3rd, 1921, to that for December 30th, 1921. A list of the ten stories receiving the most votes, together with honorable mention of the next ten, will be published as soon as possible after the results of the vote can be compiled.

DYNAMITE. Will it explode when thrown against a stone wall? In one of Talbot Mundy's stories it did, and a reader wrote in to take issue with the author. Other readers came to Mr. Mundy's defense, however, and we printed some of their letters. Here are some more.

No doubt in this comrade's mind:

Seward, Oklahoma.

The man is not living who knows all the tricks and caprices of dynamite, but it would take a vast graveyard to hold all who have experimented with the stuff. Dynamite containing a small per cent. of nitro-glycerin can be treated much the same as a gentle mule; there is a certain hazard to be sure. When one gets hold of high per cent. dynamite he is shaking hands with the undertaker and if he desires to live long and prosper he will not drop it, hit it with a hammer, burn it, or use it as a breakfast food.

Back in the old days, where there was no Mrs. Adams, or little Adamses, I learned considerable about the actions of various kinds and grades of dynamite, so when I read "The Shriek of Dûm" I thought to myself: "Yep, they used live stuff, and it turned the trick just as I suspected."—RUSSELL ADAMS.

Didn't even have to hit it this time:

Paducah, Kentucky.

The writer is an experienced miner from Arizona and Old Mexico and has had many peculiar experiences with dynamite. Mr. Mundy did not stretch his imagination too far in relating the explosions in connection with his dynamite stories.

I remember one instance of placing five or six sticks of dynamite a short distance from our prospect hole down in Mexico. It was a boiling-hot day. In fact, when I had occasion to go where the dynamite was placed and remove one stick I noticed that the heat from the sun had drawn a great deal of the nitro-glycerin out of the cartridges. Shortly after returning to our hole there was a premature explosion of the dynamite which was left out in the sun, and I can not explain the occurrence in any way except that the nitro-glycerin had spontaneously generated heat and combusion was sufficiently rapid to cause the explosion.

I do not know who the gentleman was who wrote the letter from Arizona stating that he was an old miner, but I do know that all old hard-rock men handle dynamite much more respectfully than the merest greenhorn.—H. R. HUMMEL.

There's a lot to know about dynamite and, as you notice, those in position to know the most are the most careful not to generalize:

Morristown, Pennsylvania.

Sir:—I wonder if I may sit by the Camp-Fire long enough to take issue with A. Gray on the subject of dynamite. Of course, he was right in his criticism of Mr. Mundy's story; in common with many others I noticed the error, but thought the story was good enough to excuse the mistake.

Mr. Gray says dynamite may be dropped "with impunity" and there is where I must differ from him. Probably in nine cases out of ten nothing would happen, perhaps even ninety-nine out of one hundred, *but you never can tell.*

I HAVE had twenty years' experience with dynamite and have seen some queer happenings. Once a powder man dropped a stick of dynamite into a twenty-foot drill hole and had his hand well peppered with sand and dust. Another had dropped eighteen sticks into a drill hole, then, leaning over the hole, "felt" of the dynamite with his tamping-stick. He had no exploder or detonator in the hole, as he had just sent his helper to get the prepared exploder, when the latter heard an explosion and there, a few feet away, lay the powder man, with half of the twenty-foot tamping-stick driven through him, entering under the chin and emerging through the back of his head.

On one occasion I went in the mines to measure a certain heading. Just back of the face I saw the miner "softening" his dynamite by rolling it between his hands. I had not gone one hundred feet when we heard an explosion and upon going back found only scattered fragments of a man. I could multiply instances. Moral, don't trust dynamite.

WHILE on the subject, let me knock another error. Many writers speak of the force of dynamite being downward. Wrong. It may appear so, for the reason that we can not see what a hole the explosion tears in the atmosphere while we can see the hole in the ground. It may be of interest to tell of an experiment I made to convince doubting foremen and powdermen who, believing most of the force was directed downward, were neglecting to put sufficient mud over the dynamite when "mud-capping" boulders.

We took three flat slabs of rock, as nearly identical in shape and size as possible, all being about

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three inches thick and about two feet square; number one was supported at the four corners, horizontally, about eight inches above the ground and the dynamite was placed in the exact center and fastened down by a strip of wood one-quarter inch by one inch extending from side to side; number two was placed exactly the same, but the stick of dynamite was placed under, instead of on top, number three was stood on edge and braced lightly at the top corners. All three had the same amount of dynamite fastened the same way and were about twenty feet apart. They were fired by battery and number two was broken up the most, as the air could escape only at the sides and not at the bottom. All who saw the experiment were satisfied that dynamite does really act in the direction of the least resistance.—D.

P. S.—As to dynamite burning freely, it usually does, but I have often seen the sticks explode when half consumed. Experts say that the unequal heating causes it to explode. I have always noticed that when dynamite caught fire while being warmed the men "scattered."

I helped to pick up the remains of seven men who were blown to pieces by dynamite which was being warmed over a stove in a shanty.—D.

ALWAYS glad to hear from our Australian comrades. There's much in common between their country and ours and it's good to have so many of them at our Camp-Fire. Like praise for the magazine, we keep out praise for our authors, hence the blanks in what follows:

"Myee," Rhodes, Sydney, Australia.

I have humped my bluey along in silence and now I want to boil my billy at your Camp-Fire, rest awhile, and then I'll beat it.

A FEW minutes ago I finished reading your "——" by ——, and it struck me that I would butt in and mention that the yarn is just great; however, before proceeding to do so I casually turned to Camp-Fire and there found E. Read's letter. And I take it that my only claim for introduction to Camp-Fire is that I am an Australian also. I indorse Read's remarks about our trees and cattle, dogs, etc., and by way of addition mention our Kookaburras that laugh like blazes and fly backwards to keep the sun out of their eyes.

But to quit the leg pulling and getting down to facts, I, too, was born in New South Wales, the mother State of our Commonwealth, and while agreeing with Read that gunmen are as scarce here as icicles in ——, would state that it is not such a long time since we had our bad (?) men in Kelly and his gang, who first came into collision with the police over a stolen cow and alleged ill treatment of Kate Kelly. The Kellys suffered a tragic end at Glenrowan Hotel, where Ned, the leader, made a desperate endeavor to fight his way through the cordon of police, encased in his famous armor, but was shot in the leg, captured and later paid the full penalty. Then there were the gangs under Gardiner, Hall, "Starlight," "Thunderbolt," "Moonlight" and others. And their days have not long since passed.

Adventure in those days wooed brazenly.

AND the stories of our pioneers are deeds of derring-do, not to mention the later deeds of Clancy of the Overflow, and the Kid, the Man from Snowy River, and the host of others whose ghosts nightly roam the reed-beds of the Overflow or ride along the fringe of the "Never Never." Even to-day around some of the old gold diggings one can strike old-timers who will crawl if necessary out of the shell into which the advance of civilization has forced them. I for one took part in a neat little shooting up that occurred down along the Snowy some short time ago, but the affair is just a little too fresh to mention in detail.

Well, pals, I have repacked my bluey and will bid you "So Long."—W. A. JONES.

A WORD from Hugh Pendexter concerning his complete novel in this issue, and particularly concerning the Ku Klux Klan:

Norway, Maine.

On July 2, 1868, Powell Clayton became the first governor of Arkansas under the Reconstruction measures of Congress, and very shortly began his fight against the Ku Klux Klan. In his "Aftermath of the Civil War in Arkansas," he states that the K. K. K. was organized by General Nathan Bedford Forrest in Memphis, Tenn., in 1867. The original name, says Clayton, was "The Order of the White Man," also called "The Knights of the White Camelia," but much more commonly known as the "Ku Klux Klan."

ALBERT H. PARKER, brother of David B. Parker, Chief Inspector of the Post-office Department at Washington, D. C., for many years, volunteered to procure inside information concerning the K. K. K. He had served through the war in the Confederate Army and came to Little Rock from Texas. He was murdered October 14, 1868, according to the confession of one John McCauly, made to Major F. M. Chrisman, ex-Confederate officer. Up to the employment of Parker, Governor Clayton says all his own efforts, through secret service agents and offers of liberal rewards, failed to gain him the necessary inside information.

I mention these facts, as there may be those who take it for granted that the K. K. K. from it rise to its end was a chivalrous organization, bent on inflicting peremptory justice in cases where the law was too tardy to act as a preventative or too lax to mete out just punishment. It may be that in its inception the K. K. K. was purely political and not intended to forward a campaign of evil. But in Arkansas, at the time of this story, the organization was military.

In proclaiming martial law in the Fall of 1868, Governor Clayton, in dwelling upon "this deplorable state of affairs," declares it is "to a great extent attributable to the Ku Klux." He placed before the General Assembly a summary of those crimes already a matter of public knowledge. The catalog is a grim one and includes the murder of many men, some killed in the night, others shot down openly in the public highways in daylight. He enumerates the crimes committed in twelve counties, and reminds that a full list can never be made. If one failed to kill when so ordered he was subject to the death penalty, according to the McCauly confession.

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Buckshot Baker of my story is patterned after Cullen Baker, a notorious desperado, for whose death $5,000 was paid in Little Rock.

THE northern part of Arkansas, especially the northeastern part, was but very sparsely settled at the time of the story. The southern part of Missouri, especially Ozark County, afforded a safe refuge for those who were "wanted." I have purposely left out those bandits whose gruesome history is well known to many of *Adventure* readers. It would be quite impossible to exaggerate the activity of lawless men from the South and Southwest who flocked to Arkansas and Missouri during '68 to loot and kill. Many of them joined the K. K. K., just as many innocent citizens joined the organization, not realizing its full scope.

The following notice was published in the *Republican*, April 6, 1868, after being posted on a tree in Pine Bluff, Ark.:

Corinth Division,
K. K. K. Pine Bluff Retreat.
Special Order No. 2

Spirit brothers; Shadows of Martyrs; Phantoms from the gory fields; Followers of Brutus!!!!!! Rally, rally, rally. When shadows gathers, moons grow dim, and stars tremble, glide to the Council Hall and wash your hands in tyrants' blood; and gaze upon the list of condemned traitors. The time has arrived. Blood must flow. The true must be saved.

Work in darkness.
Bury in waters.
Make no sound.
Trust not the air.
Strike high and sure.
Vengeance! Vengeance! Vengeance!

Tried, condemned. Execute well. Fear is dead. Every man is a judge, and this Executes!!!!!! Fail not!! Mandate of the M. G. C.
By D. M. G. C. 12 m p 2.

Martial law was revoked in March, 1869. I would not dwell at such length upon this condition of affairs in Arkansas if it did not form the hinge on which the plot of my story swings.—HUGH PENDEXTER.

MORE responses to comrade MacDonald's suggestion that Camp-Fire equip and send out an expedition of its own.

In the following is a splendid suggestion of having a Camp-Fire committee in each State. There would be lots of advantages in this, but there should also be committees in Canada and all over the globe. Such committees would be extremely valuable not only in this matter but also in others that will arise or have already arisen. Permanent committees would bring us all closer together and make it far easier to get a general vote or expression of opinion from the mass of us on any subject at any time. A lot could be accomplished for our greater enjoyment if we had some such machinery as that.

BUT ISN'T it going to be a very difficult matter? We can't actually get together and vote, so I or some one else would have to select the committees pretty arbitrarily and certainly with little real knowledge of their qualifications. I'd give a good deal to see such committees established, but wouldn't it be far harder than the following letter suggests? Any other ideas on this? Should a State have as many names as a State with ten times as many inhabitants? Wouldn't all members of all committees be barred from going?

Again, I'd prefer an expedition handled by ourselves and under our own auspices. But after you've thought it over in cold blood I believe most of you'll agree there are too many difficulties in the path. Most of these difficulties would vanish under the auspices of some big museum. However, that's for you to decide.

Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The proposal made by Mr. McDonald should meet with the approval of other members of that tribe who have the wanderlust, whether they have been enabled to follow the call of the road that always leads "just beyond" or not.

I do not believe it would savor so much of the true object aimed at if the expedition were conducted under the auspices of a museum. I agree with you that the reason you have advanced for this is to be commanded; but after all, as I understand it, the purpose of this expedition is to give to those followers of adventure—passive or active—an expedition of their own, one in which they will have some say. I am going to submit a starting-point for a plan:

EVERY member of such expedition should be an adventurer and chosen exclusively from among the ranks of the adventurers of *Adventure*. To do this should not be difficult. Every man who desires to be a member should send in a complete statement as to his qualifications for such expedition; very brief yet containing the pertinent facts. We have, let us say, 10,000 such applications to be sent to a committee of not less than five members of Camp-Fire, such committee to be established as follows:

The members of Camp-Fire in each State who will agree to serve upon these elimination and selection committees will send in to you a statement to that effect. You can select, then, those who are from one vicinity and appoint from among them the committee. From among the applications the committee in each State will select ten.

IF I live in New York and wish to send in my application it will go to the, let us say, California committee—a different State to avoid the suggestion that a committee may put its own members upon its list of ten.

THE ten names of the highest qualified in each State are sent to you and are published in *Adventure* along with the summary of qualifications and from this list the readers will vote upon those

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that are to be upon the expedition. (Suggestions as to what the expedition shall be should likewise be sent to the committees and they will select and send in to you for publication and vote by the readers.)

Ten names from each State would be 480 names and possibly would be impracticable for publication in *Adventure*. In that event, you and others, if desired, could eliminate a certain percentage from each State as returned by the committee.

The expedition suggestion calls for an answer from every reader of *Adventure* who takes an interest in the magazine as every one should that follows the trails that lead nowhere, and for no reason except that wanderlust, spirit of adventure, leads them on, and *Adventure* isn't a magazine so much as it is a family letter from one follower of the (what'll I call it this time?) to another.—JOHN PAUL JONES.

Here is one with a different plan. Personally I'm against an expedition composed of men chosen by chance from everywhere. A first essential is that men should be chosen for suitability to the work and for the probability of being able to pull together.

Fort Wayne, Indiana.

I am very much pleased with the idea, but believe it would be much more successful if applied as follows:

THE Camp-Fire would organize and sponsor a club known as the Adventure Club (or some other suitable name), the membership card of which would be essentially the same as a lottery ticket. The winning numbers would be allowed to participate in the annual expedition. Any spoils or profits resulting from this expedition would be split between the participants and the club treasury.

The members would be divided in two classes, those experienced and those inexperienced. Membership price, each, would not exceed a dollar. The number of memberships purchasable would be unlimited. There would be one man selected to as many memberships as would successfully equip and maintain one man on the expedition. The tenderfeet and the old-timers would be two separate classes. In order to be in the latter class a man would have to affirm on his honor his ability to pass a certain set of requirements. Which set of requirements would be determined by a council of experts and published in *Adventure*. Men would be selected separately from the tenderfeet and from the old-timers, this being done so as nearly as possible to balance the expedition with experienced and with inexperienced men. No one would be permitted to accompany an expedition unless he had successfully passed a physical examination showing him to be physically fit to withstand the hardships. Active membership would be withheld from all except those who showed themselves to be clean, honorable men of the white race.

THE president of the club would call a council of experts, who would select, say, a half dozen expeditions and their leaders. These particulars would then be published in *Adventure* and the members would select by ballot the most popular expedition and its leader (a ballot would come with each membership for this purpose). Only expeditions which were financially possible would be published for selection. After the selection of the expedition the membership stubs would be drawn, the fortunate members notified, and the final details of the expedition planned.

This appeals to me as somewhat more sporting than the first proposition. How does it appeal to you? *Hasta luego.*—R. E. STUART.

DON'T forget—*Adventure* now appears three times a month in accordance with our readers' vote. The dates of issue are the tenth, twentieth and thirtieth of the month, with due allowance for February. In the first issue of each month the Camp-Fire will contain a complete list of Camp-Fire Stations together with letters from Station Keepers and other dope.

IT'S a compliment to the people who read our magazine that the number of anonymous communications from them to us is amazingly close to zero. So I know that you share my exceedingly low opinion of the anonymous letter writer. Generally I pass them by with contempt, but here's one that deserves print because it's so blamed silly.

He complains because he says we "frequently use" in our stories the expression, "Kick the oakum out of a person." Also another expression along the same line, which, if he sees this, I ask him to give an instance of, citing the issue and page. It is possible we passed over it in a story through sheer stupid carelessness, but certainly in no other way would it have got into our pages.

As to these two expressions, he writes, "I request that you cease their use. You can't fool any body by the use of such phrases. Be *decent*."

I'm no little angel child, but if my mind habitually hunted so hard for filth that it found indecency in the expression quoted above, I'd ask some one to poison me and I'd be fair enough to let him throw it to me instead of coming close enough to hand it. The kind of "decency" our anonymous friend has comes pretty close to being moral perversion and degeneracy, but most of all it means a lack of ordinary horse sense. No wonder he wasn't willing to sign his name.

We keep this magazine decent in a real man's sense of the word and any time we feel unable to do so we'll apply for help to another kind of person than this thoroughly decayed and nameless onion.—A. S. H.

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VARIOUS PRACTICAL SERVICES FREE TO ANY READER

These services of *Adventure* are free to any one. They involve much time, work and expense on our part, but we offer them gladly and ask in return only that you **read and observe the simple rules**, thus saving needless delay and trouble for us. The whole spirit of the magazine is one of friendliness. No formality between editors and readers. Whenever we can help we're ready and willing to try. **Remember: Magazines are made up ahead of time. Allow for two or three months between sending and publication.**

Identification Cards

Free to any reader. Just send us (1) your name and address, (2) name and address of party to be notified, (3) a stamped and self-addressed return envelope.

Each card bears this inscription, each printed in English, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Dutch, Italian, Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Japanese:

"In case of death or serious emergency to bearer, address serial number of this card, care of *Adventure*, New York, stating full particulars, and friends will be notified."

In our office, under each serial number, will be registered the name of bearer and of one or two friends, with permanent address of each. No name appears on the card. Letters will be forwarded to friend, unopened by us. Names and addresses treated as confidential. We assume no other obligations. Cards not for business identification. Cards furnished free *provided stamped and addressed envelope accompanies application.* We reserve the right to use our own discretion in all matters pertaining to these cards.

Metal Cards—For twenty-five cents we will send you, *post-paid*, the same card in aluminum composition, perforated at each end. Enclose a self-addressed return envelope, but no postage. Twenty-five cents covers everything. Give same data as for pasteboard cards. Holders of pasteboard cards can be registered under both pasteboard and metal cards if desired, but old numbers can not be duplicated on metal cards. If you no longer wish your old card, destroy it carefully and notify us, to avoid confusion and possible false alarms to your friends registered under that card.

A moment's thought will show the value of this system of card-identification for any one, whether in civilization or out of it. Remember to furnish stamped and addressed envelope and to *give in full the names and addresses of self and friend or friends when applying.*

If check or money order is sent, please make it out to the Ridgway Company, *not* to any individual.

Mail Address and Forwarding Service

This office, assuming no responsibility, will be glad to act as a forwarding address for its readers or to hold mail till called for, provided necessary postage is supplied. Unclaimed mail which we have held for a long period is listed on the last page of the last issue of each month.

Missing Friends or Relatives

Our free service department "Lost Trails" in the pages following, though frequently used in cases where detective agencies, newspapers, and all other methods have failed, or for finding people long since dead, has located a very high percentage of those inquired for. Except in case of relatives, inquiries from one sex to the other are barred.

Back Issues of *Adventure*

The Boston Magazine Exchange, 109 Mountfort St., Boston, Mass., can supply Adventure *back through* 1918, *and occasional copies before that.*

WILL BUY: Back issues from the beginning to 1918. State price before sending.—Address RUTH BROWN, 30 Huntington Ave., Room 222, Boston, Mass.

WILL BUY: First Sept., 1918.—Address J. M. SHAMBLIN, 716 Common St., Lake Charles, La.

WILL SELL: Jan., 1914, at 15 cents; 1919 and 1920 complete, each year (24 numbers) at $3 each; 1921 up to date at 15 cents each; all in good condition.—Address ROBERT T. CONRAD, 54 Hillside Road, Mt. Kisco, N. Y.

Expeditions and Employment

While we should like to be of aid in these matters, experience has shown that it is not practicable.

Manuscripts

Glad to look at any manuscript. We have no "regular staff" of writers. A welcome for new writers. *It is not necessary to write asking to submit your work.*

When submitting a manuscript, if you write a letter concerning it, enclose it *with* the manuscript; do *not* send it under separate cover. Enclose stamped and addressed envelope for return. All manuscripts should be typewritten double-spaced, with wide margins, not rolled, name and address on first page. We assume no risk for manuscripts or illustrations submitted, but use all due care while they are in our hands. Payment on acceptance.

We want only clean stories. Sex, morbid, "problem," psychological and supernatural stories barred. Use almost no fact-articles. Can not furnish or suggest collaborators. Use fiction of almost any length; under 3000 welcomed.

Camp-Fire Stations

In their homes or shops some members of Camp-Fire—any one belongs who wishes to—maintain Stations where wanderers may call and receive such hospitality as the Keeper wishes to offer. The only requirements are that the Station display the regular sign, provide a box for mail to be called for and keep the regular register book. Otherwise Keepers run their Stations to suit themselves and are not responsible to this magazine or representative of it. List of Stations and further details are published in the Camp-Fire in the first issue of each month.

Camp-Fire Buttons

To be worn on lapel of coat by members of Camp-Fire—any one belongs who wishes to. Enameled in dark colors representing earth, sea and sky, and bear the numeral 71—the sum of the letters of the word Camp-Fire valued according to position in the alphabet. Very small and inconspicuous. Designed to indicate the common interest which is the only requisite for membership in Camp-Fire and to enable members to recognize each other when they meet in far places or at home. Twenty-five cents, post-paid, anywhere.

When sending for the button enclose a strong, self-addressed, *un*stamped envelope.

If check or money order is sent, please make it out to the Ridgway Company, *not* to any individual.

General Questions from Readers

In addition to our free service department "Ask Adventure" on the pages following, *Adventure* can sometimes answer other questions within our general field. When it can, it will. Expeditions and employment excepted.

Addresses

Order of the Restless—Organizing to unite for fellowship all who feel the wanderlust. First suggested in this magazine, though having no connection with it aside from our friendly interest. Address WAYNE EBERLY, 519 Citizens Bldg., Cleveland, Ohio.

Camp-Fire—Any one belongs who wishes to.

Rifle Clubs—Address Nat. Rifle Ass'n of America, 1108 Woodward Bldg., Washington, D. C.

(*See also under "Standing Information" in "Ask Adventure."*)

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Ask Adventure

A Free Question and Answer Service Bureau of Information on Outdoor Life and Activities Everywhere and Upon the Various Commodities Required Therein. Conducted for *Adventure* Magazine by Our Staff of Experts.

QUESTIONS should be sent, not to this office, but direct to the expert in charge of the section in whose field it falls. So that service may be as prompt as possible, he will answer you by mail direct. But he will also send to us a copy of each question and answer, and from these we shall select those of most general interest and publish them each issue in this department, thus making in itself an exceedingly valuable standing source of practical information. Unless otherwise requested, inquirer's name and town are printed with question; street numbers not given.

When you ask for *general* information on a given district or subject the expert may give you some valuable general pointers and refer you to books or to local or special sources of information.

Our experts will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their sections subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assumes any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible. These experts have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but with an eye to their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a given commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

1. **Service free to anybody, provided stamped and addressed envelope is enclosed. Correspondents writing to or from foreign countries will please enclose International Reply Coupons, purchasable at any post-office, and exchangeable for stamps of any country in the International Postal Union.**
2. **Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. Do NOT send questions to this magazine.**
3. **No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.**
4. **Make your questions definite and specific. State exactly your wants, qualifications and intentions. Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.**
5. **Send no question until you have read very carefully the exact ground covered by the particular expert in whose section it seems to belong.**

1. The Sea Part 1
BERIAH BROWN, 1508 Columbia St., Olympia, Wash. Ships, seamen and shipping; nautical history, seamanship, navigation, yachting, small-boat sailing; commercial fisheries of North America; marine bibliography of U. S.; fishing-vessels of the North Atlantic and Pacific banks. (*See next section.*)

2. ★ The Sea Part 2
CAPTAIN A. E. DINGLE, Hamilton, Bermuda. Questions on the sea, ships and men local to the British Empire go to Captain Dingle, not Mr. Brown. (*Postage 5 cents.*)

3. ★ Islands and Coasts
CAPTAIN A. E. DINGLE, Hamilton, Bermuda. Islands of Indian and Atlantic oceans; the Mediterranean; Cape Horn and Magellan Straits. Ports, trade, peoples, travel. (*Postage 5 cents.*)

4. ★ New Zealand; and South Sea Islands Part 1
TOM L. MILLS, *The Feilding Star*, Feilding, New Zealand. New Zealand, Cook Islands, Samoa. Travel, history, customs; adventure, exploring, sport. (*Postage 8 cents.*)

5. South Sea Islands Part 2
CHARLES BROWN, JR., 213 E St., San Rafael, Calif. French Oceania (Tahiti, the Society, Paumoto, Marquesas); Islands of Western Pacific (Solomons, New Hebrides, Fiji, Tonga); of Central Pacific (Guam, Ladrone, Pelew, Caroline, Marshall, Gilbert, Ellice); of the Detached (Wallis, Penrhyn, Danger, Easter, Rotuma, Futuna, Pitcairn). Natives, history, travel, sports, equipment, climate, living conditions, commerce, pearling, vanilla and coconut culture.

6. ★ Australia and Tasmania
ALBERT GOLDIE, Sydney Press Club, 51 Elizabeth St., Sydney, Australia. Customs, resources, travel, hunting, sports, history. (*Postage 5 cents.*)

7. Malaysia, Sumatra and Java
FAY-COOPER COLE, Ph. D., Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, Ill. Hunting and fishing, exploring, commerce, natives, history, institutions.

8. New Guinea
DR. ALBERT BUELL LEWIS, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, Ill. Hunting and fishing, exploring, commerce, natives, history, institutions.

9. Philippine Islands
BUCK CONNOR, 5444 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood, Calif. History, natives, topography, customs, travel, hunting, fishing, minerals, agriculture, commerce.

10. Hawaiian Islands and China
F. J. HALTON, 632 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill. Customs, travel, natural history, resources, agriculture, fishing, hunting.

11. Japan
GRACE P. T. KNUDSON, Castine, Me. Commerce, politics, people, customs, history, geography, travel, agriculture, art, curios.

12. Asia, Southern
CAPTAIN BEVERLEY GIDDINGS, 1315 Josephine Street, New Orleans, La. Arabia, Persia, India, Tibet, Burma, western China, Borneo. Hunting, exploring, traveling, customs.

13. Russia and Eastern Siberia
MAJOR A. M. LOCHWITZKY (formerly Lieut.-Col. I. R. A., Ret.), care *Adventure*. Petrograd and its province; Finland, northern Caucasus, Primorsk district, island of Sakhalien. Travel, hunting, fishing; explorations among native tribes; markets, trade, curios.

14. Africa Part 1
THOMAS S. MILLER, Carmel, Monterey Co., Calif. Gold, Ivory and Fever Coasts of West Africa, Niger River to Jebba, northern Nigeria. Canoeing, labor, trails, trade, expenses, outfitting, flora, tribal histories, witchcraft.

15. Africa Part 2 Morocco
GEORGE E. HOLT, Frederick, Md. Travel, tribes, customs, history, topography, trade.

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16. Africa Part 3 Tripoli
CAPTAIN BEVERLEY GIDDINGS, 1315 Josephine Street, New Orleans, La. Including the Hoggar Tuaregs and caravan routes. Traveling, exploring, customs, caravan trade

17. ✠ Africa Part 4 Portuguese East Africa
R. G. WARING, Corunna, Ontario, Canada. Trade, produce, climate, opportunities, game, wild life, travel, expenses, outfits, health, etc. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

18. ★ Africa Part 5 Transvaal, N. W. and Southern Rhodesia, British East Africa, Uganda and the Upper Congo
CHARLES BEADLE, Ile de Lerne, par Vannes, Morbihan, Brittany, France. Geography, hunting, equipment, trading, climate, transport, customs, living conditions, witchcraft, adventure and sport. (*Postage 12 cents.*)

19. Africa Part 6 Cape Colony, Orange River Colony, Natal and Zululand
CAPTAIN F. J. FRANKLIN, 40 South Clark St., Chicago, Ill. Climate, shooting and fishing, imports and exports; health resorts, minerals, direct shipping routes from U. S., living conditions, travel, opportunities for employment. Free booklets on: Orange-growing, apple-growing, sugar-growing, maize-growing; viticulture; sheep and fruit ranching.

20. South America. Part 1
EDGAR YOUNG, care *Adventure*. Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Chile. Geography, inhabitants, history, industries, topography, minerals, game, languages, customs.

21. South America Part 2
P. H. GOLDSMITH, *Inter-American Magazine*, 407 West 117th St., New York, N. Y. Venezuela, the Guianas, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay and Argentine Republic. Travel, history, customs, industries, topography, natives, languages, hunting and fishing.

22. Central America
EDGAR YOUNG, care *Adventure*. Canal Zone, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, British Honduras, Salvador, Guatemala. Travel, language, game, conditions, minerals, trading.

23. Mexico Part 1 Northern
J. W. WHITEAKER, 1505 West 10th St., Austin, Tex. Border States of old Mexio—Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon and Tamaulipas. Minerals, lumbering, agriculture, travel, customs, topography, climate, natives, hunting, history, industries.

24. Mexico Part 2 Southern; and Lower California
C. R. MAHAFFEY, Apartado 168, Mazatlan, Sinaloa, Mexico. Lower California; Mexico south of a line from Tampico to Mazatlan. Mining, agriculture, topography, travel, hunting, lumbering, history, natives, business and general conditions.

25. ✠ North American Snow Countries Part 1
S. E. SANGSTER ("Canuck"), L. B. 393, Ottawa, Canada. Height of Land and northern Quebec and Ontario (except strip between Minn. and C. P. Ry.); southeastern Ungava and Keewatin. Sport, canoe routes, big game, fish, fur; equipment; Indian life and habits; Hudson's Bay Co. posts; minerals, timber; customs regulations. No questions answered on trapping for profit. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

26. ✠ North American Snow Countries Part 2
HARRY M. MOORE, Deseronto, Ont., Canada. Ottawa Valley and southeastern Ontario. Fishing, hunting, canoeing, mining, lumbering, agriculture, topography, travel, camping, aviation. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

27. ✠ North American Snow Countries Part 3
GEORGE L. CATTON, Tweed, Ont., Canada. Georgian Bay and southern Ontario. Fishing, hunting, trapping, canoeing. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

28. North American Snow Countries Part 4
T. F. PHILLIPS, Department of Science, Duluth Central High School, Duluth, Minn. Hunters Island and English River district. Fishing, camping, hunting, trapping, canoeing, climate, topography, travel.

29. North American Snow Countries Part 5
ED. L. CARSON, La Connor, Wash. Yukon, British Columbia and Alberta including Peace River district; to Great Slave Lake. Outfits and equipment, guides, big game, minerals, forest, prairie; travel; customs regulations.

30. ✠ North American Snow Countries Part 6
REECE H. HAGUE, The Pas, Manitoba, Canada. Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Mackenzie and northern Keewatin. Homesteading, mining, hunting, trapping, lumbering and travel. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

31. ✠ North American Snow Countries Part 7
JAS. F. B. BELFORD, Codrington, Ont., Canada. New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and southeastern Quebec. Hunting, fishing, lumbering, camping, trapping, auto and canoe trips, history, topography, farming, homesteading, mining, paper industry, water-power. (*Postage 3 cents.*)

32. North American Snow Countries Part 8
THEODORE S. SOLOMONS, 2837 Fulton St., Berkeley, Calif. **Alaska.** Arctic life and travel; boats, packing, backpacking, traction, transport, routes; equipment, clothing, food; physics, hygiene; mountain work.

33. Western U. S. Part 1
E. E. HARRIMAN, 2303 W. 23rd St., Los Angeles, Calif. California, Oregon, Washington, Utah, Nevada, Arizona. Game, fur, fish; camp, cabin; mines, minerals; mountains.

34. Western U. S. Part 2
J. W. WHITEAKER, 1505 W. 10th St., Austin, Tex. Texas and Oklahoma. Minerals, agriculture, travel, topography, climate, hunting, history, industries.

35. Middle Western U. S. Part 1
JOSEPH MILES HANSON (lately Capt. A. E. F.), care *Adventure*. The Dakotas, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas. Hunting, fishing, travel. Early history of Missouri Valley.

36. Middle Western U. S. Part 2
JOHN B. THOMPSON, 906 Pontiac Bldg., Chicago, Ill. Missouri, Arkansas and the Missouri Valley up to Sioux City, Iowa. Wilder countries of the Ozarks, and swamps; hunting, fishing, trapping, farming, mining and range lands; big-timber sections.

37. Middle Western U. S. Part 3
LARRY ST. JOHN, Saugatuck, Mich. Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Lake Michigan. Fishing, hunting, trapping, lumbering, canoeing, camping, guides, outfits, motoring, agriculture, minerals, natural history, clamming, early history, legends.

38. Eastern U. S. Part 1
RAYMOND S. SPEARS, Little Falls, N. Y. Mississippi, Ohio, Tennessee, Michigan and Hudson valleys; Great Lakes, Adirondacks, Chesapeake Bay; river, lake and road travel; game, fish and woodcraft; furs, fresh-water pearls, herbs, and their markets.

39. Eastern U. S. Part 2
HAPSBURG LIEBE, Orlando, Fla. Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, N. and S. Carolina, Florida and Georgia except Tennessee River and Atlantic seaboard. Hunting, fishing, camping; logging, lumbering, sawmilling, saws.

40. Eastern U. S. Part 3
DR. G. E. HATHORNE, 70 Main Street, Bangor, Me. Maine. Fishing, hunting, canoeing, guides, outfits, supplies.

WEAPONS, PAST and PRESENT

Rifles, shotguns, pistols, revolvers, ammunition and edged weapons. (Any questions on the arms adapted to a particular locality should *not* be sent to this department but to the "Ask Adventure" editor covering the district in question.)

A.—All Shotguns including foreign and American makes; wing shooting. J. B. THOMPSON, 906 Pontiac Bldg., Chicago, Ill.

B.—All Rifles, Pistols and Revolvers (including foreign and American makes). D. WIGGINS, Salem, Ore.

C. Edged Weapons, and Firearms Prior to 1800. Swords, pikes, knives, battle-axes, etc., and all firearms of the flintlock, matchlock, wheellock and snaphaunce varieties. LEWIS APPLETON BARKER, 40 University Road, Brookline, Mass.

FISHING IN NORTH AMERICA

Salt and Fresh Water Fishing

J. B. THOMPSON, 906 Pontiac Bldg., Chicago, Ill. Covering fishing-tackle and equipment; fly and bait casting; live bait; camping outfits; fishing trips.

MOUNTAINS and MOUNTAINEERING

Especially mountains of New England. Arthur Bent, Appalachian Mountain Club, 1050 Tremont Bldg., Boston, Mass.

STANDING INFORMATION

For general information on U. S. and its possessions, write Supt. of Public Documents, Wash., D. C., for catalog of all Government publications.

For the Philippines, Porto Rico, and customs receiverships in Santo Domingo and Haiti, the Bureau of Insular Affairs, War Dept., Wash., D. C.

For Alaska, the Alaska Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, Central Bldg., Seattle, Wash.

For Hawaii, Hawaii Promotion Committee, Chamber of Commerce, Honolulu, T. H. Also, Dept. of the Interior, Wash., D. C.

For Cuba, Bureau of Information, Dept. of Agrl., Com. and Labor, Havana, Cuba.

The Pan-American Union may be called upon for general information relating to Latin-American matters or for specific data. Address L. S. Rowe, Dir. Gen., Wash., D. C.

For R. C. M. P., Commissioner Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Ottawa, Can. Only unmarried British subjects, age 18 to 40, above 5 ft. 8 in. and under 175 lbs.

For Canal Zone, the Panama Canal Comm., Wash., D. C.

For U. S., its possessions and most foreign countries, the Dep't of Com., Wash., D. C.

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More about the Dominican Republic

HERE'S a correspondence which goes to show the difficulties an "Ask Adventure" man encounters when he tries to get up-to-date dope about a territory that he hasn't been able to visit recently. Of course everybody knows that an A. A. man can't always be right on the spot he's writing about, and so must depend more or less on the written word to keep him in touch. And, also of course, every once in a while under these circumstances he gets let down hard.

Captain Dingle answers questions on the maritime affairs of the whole British Empire, and on the islands and coasts of four major-league oceans—North Atlantic, South Atlantic, Mediterranean and Indian. His work receives far more praise than blame, which leads us here in the office to think that you who read the magazine join us in admiration at the efficiency with which he covers these vast tracts.

Now for the correspondence that started all this:

San Pedro de Macoris, Dominican Republic.
EDITOR, "Ask Adventure."
DEAR SIR:—

In your issue of May 3d, 1921, I notice that your Captain Dingle has answered W. T. Duganne's letter regarding the conditions in Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic, in a very unsatisfactory manner, showing that he is in absolute ignorance of the conditions that prevail at the present time.

In the first place Captain Dingle refers to the Dominican Republic as a "negro nation," and I desire to state here that he is very much in error, having evidently confused the Republic of Haiti with this country. This republic is inhabited by people of Spanish descent, darker perhaps in color than most Latin-American people, due to the one-time occupation by the Haitians, who desired to make this a negro country as well as their own; but they were forced to retire again.

Where does Captain Dingle get his information that this country has nothing worth-while for white men? Who informed him that they would have to get a concession from the "black president"? The Dominican Republic has not had a president since 1916, for at that time the United States Government intervened and since that year the republic has been governed by a military governor and his staff in much the same manner as the President of the United States is governed. The captain is evidently quoting from his knowledge or hearsay of this country of the date of about 1900.

Puerto Plata is in need of a good hotel, and it is by no means necessary to cater to a black clientéle, as the higher class of people who would patronize such a hotel are not black and are generally well informed about all matters of the universe, due to their travels in the United States and Europe. Although these people have fought for their independence, they are at present under the rule, more or less, of the United States. Naturally they do not bow down to any one; but why should they when they are equally educated and informed as most of the visiting races? However, they are exceedingly polite people, and much may be learned by contact with them.

The steamer of the Panama Railroad Steamship Co. does not touch the ports of the Dominican Republic, the ports being touched by the Clyde Steamship Company, the Bull Insular Line, Inc., the Columbus Steamship Co., Inc., the Atlantic Fruit Company, the New Orleans and South American S.S. Line, the Dutch Royal Mail S.S. Co. These steamers have a monthly service between these ports and New York, New Orleans and Europe; therefore there is a bi-weekly cargo service and a weekly passenger service in all ports.

From Santiago de los Caballeros (a city of near 20,000 inhabitants in the interior), San Francisco de Macoris (about 10,000 inhabitants in the interior) and other small cities near the above-mentioned there is a Government-owned railroad running to Puerto Plata, and the traffic over same is quite considerable.

The tourist trade is beginning to come to this country, due to the fact that this is the country which alone shows the handiwork of Christopher Columbus in the New World. In the capital city, Santo Domingo, may be seen the fort, churches and other buildings built by Columbus and his son. These buildings are now being renovated, and there is no doubt that when the world gets back to a more settled basis there will be a great influx of tourists into this country. Also the large sugar estates of this country would furnish much American patronage in a proper hotel over week-ends, etc.

I have been regularly reading *Adventure* for many years and always have been interested in the question and answer bureau provided for its readers, but many times have noticed that the answers to questions were based on a knowledge of a few years past. Having been in this country for the past few years and personally knowing the actual conditions, I can not do otherwise but criticize such utter lack of knowledge as is shown in Captain Dingle's article. Rather than furnish information that is misleading, would it not be better to have such questions answered through your columns, by some person with actual knowledge of the conditions at the time?

Mr. Editor, it is suggested that Captain D. be given an exam. on geography and history as it is today.

Yours for a better service in the future.—H. W. TRYON.

Commenting on this letter, Captain Dingle says in part:

The trouble seems to be that none of my avenues of information have proved up. My own experience, not hearsay as friend Tryon humorously suggests, goes back almost as far as the date he mentions; and, short of all of us poor "Ask Adventure" men eternally traveling along the routes we cover to keep up to date, there seems no way other than that I, in common with others, follow, of keeping in touch; *i.e.*, establishing correspondents, using the various government bureaus and the Pan-American Union or some similar institution.

If we traveled all the time there would be no time

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either to bother about replying to letters or even to make a living, would there?

Well, about the Dominican Republic thing. I am not at all under any impression that it and Haiti are one. I know also that the colored people of the former—they *are* colored, in both republics, unless they are white foreigners—are of mixed Spanish blood, as the Haitians are of French mixture and leanings.

But what even the Pan-American Union's most recent bulletin fails to show me is that the president has definitely been replaced by a military governor. It seems certain that this is so now. I am therefore trying to establish better facilities for dealing with this particular island.

Conditions such as I described were such not so long ago, that's certain. Captain Mitchell, of the American schooner *Joel Cook*, in here not long ago from San Pedro de Macoris, where by the way my critic resides, told me personally that conditions had altered very little anywhere outside the ports. Apparently all my informants were in error.

I hope Mr. Tryon will not write me down altogether a crook for giving out information which was to the best of my resources correct, simply because conditions have changed.

I think, in conclusion, I can do no better than to express my thanks to Mr. Tryon for his coming forward and putting me right. It has always been known that Santo Domingo, or the Dominican Republic, is enormously wealthy in natural resources, but mining and exploration men whom I have spoken to both in New York and Bermuda have always asserted that until the United States either took it over or declared a protectorate over it there would never be a reasonable field for white exploitation. Glad to know this has changed now.

Thanks are also due to Mr. C. H. Jenkins U. S. M. C., and to others, for checking over Captain Dingle's statements. Mr. Jenkins makes the same points as does Mr. Tryon. Moreover, he says that although ninety per cent. of the natives are of mixed blood—classified in the United States as negroes—less than ten per cent. of the black people visit hotels.

He also objects to the Dominican Republic being referred to as Santo Domingo, and says that the correct spelling of Porto Plata is Puerto Plata. If correct usage is to be defined as current usage, no doubt he's right. However, Captain Dingle's names were the names I learned in school, just as in those days the Hawaiians were called the Sandwich Islands and today it's stylish to refer to Korea as Chosen. After all, I guess any of these places by any other name would smell as sweet; and as long as they're recognizable, what's the odds?

Mr. Jenkins also gives some interesting statistics regarding the railroad mileage, public and private, and the exports of the republic. We'd print them if they were in dispute; but as they are not, we have to omit them in order to economize on space.

Hunting "Captain Cookers" and Wapiti

A WAPITI, in case you don't happen to know it—I didn't until I looked it up—is a large red deer that looks like a discouraged runt elk. The dictionary says it's confined to North America, which is one on the dictionary. And you'll learn about Captain Cookers from the subjoined:

Question:—"Please give me information on New Zealand, in regard to game and climate. I am twenty-seven years old, have worked at everything and been all over the U. S. Hunted 'most everything here. In the Navy during the war. Am not afraid of a pick and shovel when the grub is low, but will admit that other jobs are better. Am a lumberjack, truck-driver or carpenter here; but anything coming my way in the line of work is all O.K.

Can a fellow get up against some real hunting down there—I mean away from people—and where a guy don't have to hire about a hundred beaters to get a crack at a jack? I'm no millionaire so will have to keep an eye out for work also.

Will get about five hundred dollars to start. Will that be enough?

Can a fellow get water there, or do you have to pack it?

What's the game to be found?

Do they use saddle-horses or autos for general travel?

Could a couple of guys have a good time, and not starve to death?

What's the hunting license?

Do you have to be a British subject?

Can you bring rifles in without a tax?

Please withhold name."

Answer, by Mr. Mills:—Game in New Zealand? Now you're on to it. This is the sportsman's paradise. You can go lose yourself in the roughest, wildest country on this footstool, and have the time of your life with rod or gun.

Down in the far southwest of the South Island we have just had an official report that wapiti have become acclimatized and are flourishing. There are big sporting stags and other deer all over the land, and as I write (April) the season for stalking has just opened, with good bags reported.

There is good fishing up in the far north, and Admiral Jellicoe, who is now Governor-General of New Zealand, has just broken camp after the time of his life with the rod, catching eight and ten pounder trout. You can get some of the best sporting deep-sea fishing with the line in various parts of our coast.

It has been well said that New Zealand "is a well-watered country"—it is everywhere—just stoop down and drink. You provide the thirst—New Zealand in any part will do the slaking.

If you want excitement and danger in sport, go after the Captain Cookers in the ranges—wild pigs descended from those the famous circumnavigator put ashore in Maoriland in the days when this part of the world was young.

Sport! I should say. You can have thrills aplenty and something new in that line over here.

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And you and that pal o' yours can roam around working your passage from one happy hunting-ground to perhaps a happier. And ever and always there are rabbits and hares for the shooting by the way.

Sport! I feel like enthusing on the proposition. You don't need to be a millionaire to have good time over here. That five hundred dollars and a willing pair of hands will see you through this anti-millionaire land.

Beaters are unknown in sporting circles in New Zealand. You have to go out after your mark—it does not feed out of the other fellow's hand for the slaughter.

Bring your favorite gun. You'll have to register it on arrival, but that won't cost you anything. The license fee for rod and gun is merely nominal—and that enables you to go anywhere without trespassing or going on forbidden land. Being an American is no bar, not by any manner of means.

Kia Ora!

Put at least five cents postage on all letters addressed to "Ask Adventure" editors who live outside the U. S. Always enclose at least five cents in International Reply Coupons for answer.

Orange Culture in Florida

BUT don't buy land of any kind anywhere without seeing it first, is a nugget of wisdom handed down in our family as the result of ancestral experience

Question:—"My partner and I are both ex-service men who were physically disabled in the war; but we can get around and take care of ourselves. We want to get your advice in regard to some place where we could buy or lease a small piece of land where we could put up a shack and live the year around. Would want a place where climate was mild in Winter and small-game hunting and fishing was good. Also not too far from supplies or transportation.

If we bought, would prefer a place that could be cleared and made to be worth something as a producer in time.

We thought you could probably advise us as to some such locality along some river in Florida or some of the States in the Southeast. Please advise us as fully as possible as to climate, drinking-water, nearest place where supplies could be obtained, etc."—MARK HARVEY, Rushville, Ill.

Answer by Mr. Liebe:—You ought to find everything you want in Lake County, Orange County, or Polk County, Florida.

If I were you I would buy 10 or 20 acres of high pine land, put up a shack on it, clear it and plant it to oranges. At 5 or 6 years old your grove ought to sell for $1,000 per acre if it is in a good location.

Lakes, clear as crystal, full of big-mouthed bass, are to be found almost anywhere in those counties, and you will find fair drinking-water with a pipe-pump almost anywhere. You could raise chickens, and grow some vegetables, too.

The climate will average fine the year around. The Summers are very long, of course, but they are rarely excessively hot.

Polk County has a fine system of asphalt roads. Orange County's roads are brick. Lake County's roads are sand-clay and asphalt. Orange County land will probably come higher than land in either of the other two counties named.

But don't buy land until you're sure it *really* is orange land. It's easy to get fooled on *anything* in Florida. Get acquainted with things first.

By the way there is some good land lying north of a line drawn from Apopka (town, not Lake Apopka) to Orlando. Fine pine woods, and full of lakes. I don't know who owns it, but I know a man who I believe could tell you; it is E. C. Kirkpatrick, and his post-office address is Apopka, Florida; you might write him if you like. This section, by the way, is known as the "Forest City" section, but there is nothing like a city there.

I'm wishing you good luck.

Taking the Choke Out of a Choke Bore

BUCKSHOT *will* do it, if used too often:

Question:—"A. claims that the use of buckshot shells in a choke-bored shotgun tends to "shoot the choke" out of such barrel, and the large shot, No. 4 or 5 buck, are liable to wedge in the barrel. Will you kindly give me your opinion?

I have an extremely good-looking muzzle-loading shotgun, made by Squires, London. Can you tell me if this was a valuable gun in its day? Is it still possible to buy percussion caps? If so, where?"—F. A. WAGNER, Avon Lake, Ohio.

Answer, by Mr. Thompson:—Buckshot will certainly take the choke out of a choke bore if shot frequently. No. 4 or 5 buck frequently split barrels or crush flat on one side in the choke and make a very uncertain pattern.

There is a Squires gun once made by an English gunmaker, and one made by an English firm for a gun-jobbing house in America that bore that name. It was a splendid grade of gun.

Von Lengerke & Antoine, 1130 S. Wabash St., Chicago, will furnish percussion caps.

Send question direct to expert in charge—NOT to the magazine.

The Small Capitalist in South Africa

LOTS of room for live ones:

Question:—"What scope is there for a man with small capital in South Africa?

I would appreciate your telling me to your best ability the country, as my ideas are rather vague. The articles in the *Saturday Evening Post* have interested me considerably.

I would be particularly interested as to the cattle-ranching country—climate, season, market, etc."—N. D. STANLEY, Oak Park, Illinois.

Answer, by Mr. Franklin:—The Union of South Africa has now been sufficiently tested and developed to be recommended. Twenty years ago it imported nearly everything it used. Today it is self-supporting and producing the necessaries of life

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in great variety—maize (corn), beef, mutton, bacon, eggs, butter, cheese, wool, cotton, sugar, tobacco, wine and fruit of every kind.

Of the men who foresaw the possibility of this development and took a part in it some no doubt failed; but most are now prosperous; many have enviable estates and incomes. What they have accomplished others may do. The opportunity is there still; indeed, today it is greater than it ever was, especially in agriculture. There is plenty of scope for men with sufficient capital to take an independent course and make good.

South Africa is certainly worthy of your attention. It is a country with a great future. Land there is still cheap, taxation is light and living conditions are most congenial. I enclose you a booklet on ranching which gives you all data even to the cost of starting and operating a ranch.

LOST TRAILS

NOTE—We offer this department of the "Camp-Fire" free of charge to those of our readers who wish to get in touch again with old friends or acquaintances from whom the years have separated them. For the benefit of the friend you seek, *give your own name if possible.* All inquiries along this line, unless containing contrary instructions, will be considered as intended for publication in full with inquirer's name, in this department, at our discretion. We reserve the right in case inquirer refuses his name, to substitute any numbers or other names, to reject any item that seems to us unsuitable, and to use our discretion in all matters pertaining to this department. Give also your own full address. We will, however, forward mail through this office, assuming no responsibility therefor. We have arranged with the Montreal *Star* to give additional publication in their "Missing Relative Column," weekly and daily editions, to any of our inquiries for persons last heard of in Canada. Except in case of relatives, inquiries from one sex to the other are barred.

GABELLE, JAMES. Left Montreal, P. Q., last Autumn for New Orleans, La. Received two letters from him, but have lost track of him. Any one knowing his whereabouts please write.—JIM MCDERMOTT, 162 North Christina St., Sarnia, Ont., Canada.

CONOLY, PAT (FRANCIS). Please write your old pal Skinney who was in Peking, China, 1916-17.—Address L. T. 430, care of *Adventure.*

EYLES, EMIL F. Father. Last seen in Lima, Ohio, about 1908. Spent some time in Cincinnati and Wheeling. Was in the piano business. Last heard from in New York City. Any information will be appreciated.—Address H. E., care of *Adventure.*

WOULD like to hear from any of the marine guard who served on the U. S. S. *North Carolina,* from 1908 to 1911.—Address ROBERT AULT, care of The Home Insurance Co., Gaylesville, Ala.

DESPARIOS, ROY B. Last heard of in Kansas City, Mo., in 1911. Height about five feet five inches. Brown eyes and hair, weight about 130 pounds. Any one knowing his whereabouts please communicate with his brother.—D. M. DESPARIOS, 2306 Market St., San Francisco, Cal.

HENDERSON, A. L. Write to your old pal of Peoria.—Address A. G. RAISTUCK, Gen. Del., Des Moines, Iowa.

THOMAS, DAVID, L. Brother of James Elias Thomas. May be on Pacific Coast. Any information will be appreciated.—Address WILLARD R. TRULL, Gen. Del., Portland, Oregon.

MILLS, LYNDEN. Brother. About six feet tall, light hair and blue eyes; age forty-one. Last heard from working on a coal-boat between Hoboken and Jersey City, Jan., 1906. Any information will be appreciated.—Address MRS. ARTHUR BEARDSLEY, P. O. Box 54, Lincklaen, Chen. Co., N. Y.

SIGSBEE, J. A. Formerly U. S. Marines, China, Philippines. Last heard from Camp Fremont, California.—Address W. W. BRIARE, Steamer *Lake Farley,* American Consul, Marseilles, France.

DE MOSS, BOB. Left Gary, Indiana two years ago. He has dark hair, slightly bald. Blue-gray eyes, about five feet 10 inches tall, forty-seven years old. He is an engineer or painter by trade. He has the U. S. emblem and clasped hands tattoed on his arm. Any information concerning his whereabouts will be appreciated by his wife.—Address MRS. FRANCES DE MOSS, Box 105, Glover, N. D.

INGRAM, JOHN MILTON. Five feet six inches tall, brown eyes, red hair, nationality Scotch, about fifty years, weighs about 150 pounds. Last heard of in Seattle about ten years ago. Any information concerning his whereabouts will be appreciated by his friends.—Address GURNEY HORSTMAN, Box 217, Outlook, Wash.

HALL, JOHN, Pvt. or sergt., U. S. Army, last heard of was in Company "A" of the Seventh, U. S. Infantry, which was at Fort Bliss, Texas. Any one knowing of his whereabouts, please write. Am very anxious to hear from him.—Address J. D. MCD. SR, care of *Adventure.*

STUBBS, RALPHY. Last heard of in Omaha, Nebraska. Please write to your "Kiddo" as she does not know where to find you. She is staying with her brother.—Address MRS. EDITH STUBBS, care of Mr. Townsend, 148 Girouard Ave., Notre Dame de Grace, Montreal, Quebec.

WILSON, ROBERT C. Bobbie please write to A. B., care of this magazine or any of his relatives.—Address L. T. 429, care of *Adventure.*

BENNETT, MARY and FRANCIS. Last seen in St. Michael's Orphan Asylum, Hopwell, N. J. Any information concerning their whereabouts will be appreciated by their brother.—Address JOHN STEPHEN BENNETT, U. S. Naval Hospital (South Surgical), Brooklyn, N. Y.

MCNABB, FRED, LEO and ETHAN, left Peoria, Ill. 1902 or 1903, with parents for Sioux Falls, S. D. or Sioux City, Iowa. Father was a cook. Probably in restaurant business. Boyhood pal wishes to locate them.—Address CHAS. F. SNYDER, 1212 No. Jefferson, Peoria, Ill.

KARNATZ "CHICK." When last heard from was at Chamute Field, Rantoul, Ill. His buddy would like to hear from him. Any information as to his whereabouts will be appreciated. Address TED F. ZALEWSKI, 15 Co., C. A. C. Fort Mills, Corregidor, Philippine Islands.

WILDE, TED. Would like to hear from you. Have important news to tell you.—Address TED F. ZALEWSKI, 15 Co., C. A. C., Fort Mills, Corregidor, Philippine Islands.

C. F. HAUN, Ex.-pvt. 1st cl., Troop A, 15th Cav. Any information concerning his whereabouts will be appreciated.—Address VICTOR HAUSE, Bellingham, Washington.

ECONONUI, AUGUST A. (Gus.) Sgt. Troop C, 15th Cav. Served in Philippine Islands, Mexican Border, France, Cheyenne, Wyoming, 1914-1920. Last seen in Everston, Wyoming, going West. Address VICTOR HAUSE, Bellingham, Washington.

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SMITH, BENJAMIN F. or "Brady" or "Bradley." Five feet seven and one-half inches tall, weighs about 140, blue eyes, light-brown hair. Served in Cuba during the American occupation in 1898. About forty-three years old now, unmarried. Might have enlisted in the U. S. Army during the late war. Can do all kinds of work; was cook. Very quick in all movements. Possibly he might be in Canada or Canal Zone. Any one knowing a man of this description will you kindly write me as I have important news for this man, who is my uncle.—Address J. E. M., care of *Adventure*.

GERRITSEN, GERRIT, nickname "Holland," twenty-five years old, was cook's mate in camp of Newport Engineering and Contracting Co., Newport News, Virginia; there said to be missing since first Sunday in August, 1920. Stocky athletic build, about five feet six, hair and eyes brown, speaks broken English.—Address GERRITSEN, 24 Fairview Avenue, Paterson, N. J.

THE following have been inquired for in either the October 10th or October 20th issues of Adventure. They can get the names of the inquirer from this magazine:

ALLEN, GEORGE FOY; Bailey, Robert; Basket, Robert; Bergin, Bill; Berry, Marle E.; Brett J.; Bredwell, Cliford; Breedon, Richard O.; Broderick, Gerald Patrick; Canuthers, Jack; Caulfield, Michael; Christian, Elam; Colston, Amos Hillier; Crow, Katherine; Delamater, Frank C.; Ford, Harry; Frantz, Charles E.; Gardner, John; Gholston, Jabez Gileon; Gould, Terry P.; Griffin, Earl or Mother; Haydon, William Jackson; Jones, Harry; Kearns, Gertrude; Krauss, Frank; Martin, Harold; Mellard, W. Donald; Payntey, E. Ware; Paasch, Wm.; Pechin, Miss Camille; Plouitz, Lewis J.; Punch, Mary; Richardson, Howard; Riddle, Harry; Schrock, Frank J.; Spowage, John; Swann, F. W.; Sweeney, E. J.; Vance, John Raymond; Wendell, Warren; Wickroy, Allen Sigal.

MISCELLANEOUS: Boys of Co. M., 167th Rainbow Div.; Clarence; J. B. L.; Members of 2 F. A. D. Batt. in Philippines and Q. M. C. Vancouver, Wash.

UNCLAIMED mail is held by Adventure for the following persons, who may obtain it by sending us present address and proof of identity.

ALDRIDGE, F. P.; Barrett, Raymond; Beaton, G. M.; Bellinger, C. J.; Bennett, Mr. and Mrs.; Bertsch, Elizabeth; Blighton, Frank; Bonner, J. S.; Buckley, Ray; Butterfield, E.; Carpenter, Robert S.; Carr, John; Casselberry, Lane P.; Chief Hailstorm; "Chink"; Clark, Wilfred J.; Clingham, Charles; Coles, Bobby; Connor, A. M.; Cook, Elliott D.; Corbett, Fred P.; Courtlandt, Victor; Craun, Galen E.; De Brissac, Ricardo; Erwin, Phillip; Evans, B. R.; Fisher, 1st Sgt. R.; Gale, Geo. A.; Gallagher, Owen; Harris, Walter J.; Haskins, S. S.; Hooker, Wm. Francis; Howard, Charlie; Hughes, Frank E.; Hunt, Daniel O'Connell; Irving, Thos. L.; Jackson, Robert R.; Klug, Chas. C.; Kuckaby, William Francis; Kutcher, Sgt. Harry; Lafler, Mrs. Harry; Lancaster, C. E.; Lander, Harry; Larisey, Jack; Lee, Wm. R., M.D.; Lekki, Micheal; "Lonely Jock"; Lovett, Harold S.; MacDonald, Tony; McAdams, W. B.; McKee, Al; MacIntosh, D. T. A.; McNair, Henry S.; Mendelson, Aleck; Minor, Dr. John; Nelson, Frank Lovell; Noll, Leslie D.; Nylander, Towne J.; O'Hara, Jack; Parker, Dr. M.; Parker, G. A.; Parrott, Pvt. D. C.; Phillips, Buffington; Phipps, Corbett C.; Pigeon, A. H.; Posner, Geo. A.; Pulis, H. F.; Raines, Wm. L.; Rich, Wagoner Bob; Roberts, Walter; Rogan, Chas. B.; Rudolph, F.; Rundle, Merrill G.; Ryder, H. S.; St. Claire, Fred; Schmidt, G.; Scott, James F.; Shaw, Albert; Sloan, Charles, A.; Smith, C. O.; Spencer, Robert; Starr, Ted; Stocking, C. B.; Terry, Lambert; Van Tyler, Chester; Von Gelucke, Byron; Ward, Frank B.; Weintraub, H. W.; Wiley, Floyd; Woeller, Erich; J. C. H.; T. W. S.; W. W.T.; S. 177284; L. T. 439; Third Officer S.S. Lake Elmdale; W. S.-XV.; 2480.

PLEASE send us your present address. Letters forwarded to you at address given us do not reach you.—Address L. B. BARRETTO, care of *Adventure*.

A LIST of unclaimed manuscripts will be published in the January 10th and July 10th issues of Adventure, and a list of unclaimed mail will be published in the last issue of each month.

THE TRAIL AHEAD

NOVEMBER 10TH ISSUE

Besides the complete novel, the complete novelette and the new serial mentioned on the second page of this issue, the next *Adventure* will bring you the following stories of daring men in dangerous places:

FISHERMAN'S LUCK — ***Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur***

A fisherman baits the King of France.

THE BLACK MALEMIUT — ***Stanton C. Lapham***

The husky serves his god.

A HE-MAN PLATFORM — ***Robert J. Horton***

"*Buck*" *Wright* seeks office, gun in hand

THE PATHLESS TRAIL A Four-Part Story Conclusion — ***Arthur O. Friel***

In the Brazilian jungle Yanks and Red Bones fight it out.

SCRAMBLED DUCKLINGS — ***E. O. Foster***

Aguinaldo hatches conspiracy in an incubator.

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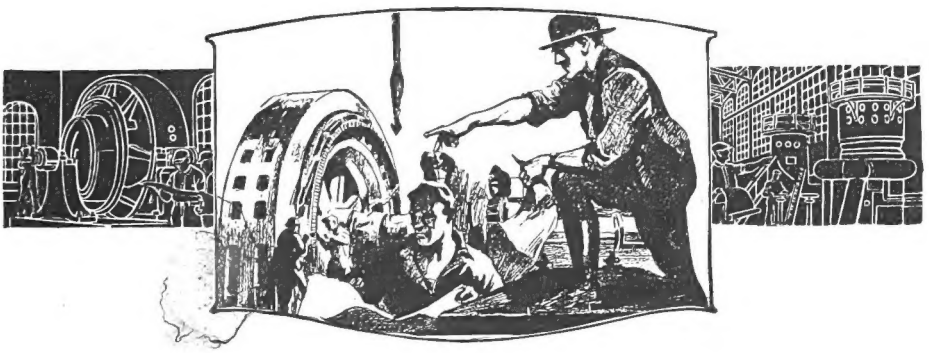
ELECTRICITY

The Short Cut To Big-Pay



Electrical Experts Earn $3,500 to $10,000 a Year

You, Too, Can Do It

How long are you going to putter along in your long-hour, small-pay, no-future job, earning $20 to $30 a week, when you can earn the same amount in a few hours as an Electrical Expert?

Why drag along in this way when with a few short months of training under me, through my easily-learned, quickly-grasped, right-up-to-the-second, spare-time, home-study course in Practical Electricity you can quickly fit yourself for one of these big jobs, the kind that pay from $3,500 to $10,000 a year?

Take my Home-Study Course "short cut" to the big pay job in the big field of today, Electricity.

I Give You A Real Training

As Chief Engineer of the Chicago Engineering Works, I know just the kind of training you need to succeed as an Electrical Expert. My course in Electricity is so simple, thorough and up-to-date that you can easily understand and apply every line of it—no big words, no useless theory, no higher mathematics—just plain, every-day, straight-from-the-shoulder, man-to-man English — the kind you and I use every day.

Your Success Guaranteed

My course is backed by an iron-clad guarantee that insures your success and satisfaction. I positively will refund every cent paid me in tuition if you are not fully satisfied. No other school will do this for you. Back of me in my guarantee stands the Chicago Engineering Works, a Million Dollar Institution.

Free Electrical Working Outfit

To make your success certain I give you tools to work with—a splendid big outfit of electrical instruments and materials. No chance for failure here!

Save $45.50 By Enrolling Now

By enrolling now you can save $45.50 on the regular low price of my course. But you must act at once. Write me today, for my Big Free Book, "How To Become An Electrical Expert." It's the first step towards bigger pay.

Yours for success,

L. L. COOKE, CHIEF ENGINEER.

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INCORPORATED

Dept. 4310, 1918 Sunnyside Ave., Chicago, Ill.

L. L. Cooke, Chief Engineer,
Chicago Engineering Works,
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Dear Sir: Send at once Sample Lessons, your Big Book, and full particulars of your Free Outfit and Home Study Course—all fully prepaid, without obligation on my part.

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THE COOKE TRAINED MAN IS THE "BIG-PAY MAN"

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With acknowledgments to K. C. B.

The Mystery of the Cook's Pet Parrot

A FUNNY paper recently.
SLIPPED ME a good laugh.
WITH A wheeze about.
A FAMOUS ventriloquist.
AND WHY he had quit.
THE VAUDEVILLE stage.
IT SAID he discovered.
HE COULD make more jack,
SELLING WOODEN parrots.
SO WHEN I got home.
I PASSED the joke.
TO OUR cook, who owns.
BOTH A speechless parrot.
AND A sense of humor.
BUT SHE muffed it.
BECAUSE SHE didn't know.
WHAT A ventriloquist was.
SO I had to explain it.
AND ON the way out.
I BLEW just a whiff.
OF CIGARETTE smoke.

AT HER amusing old.
FOOL OF a parrot.
WHICH NEVER talks.
AND I said, "Poll.
HOW D'YOU like it?"
AND TO this day.
IT'S GOT me guessing.
WHETHER IT was cook.
OR THE blamed bird.
WHICH SQUAWKED back.
"THEY SATISFY."

CHESTERFIELDS speak for themselves. They let you know you're smoking. They "satisfy" and yet, they're *mild*. An impossible combination, you say? Sure—everywhere but in Chesterfields. The blend does it and the blend *can't be copied!*

They Satisfy

Chesterfield

CIGARETTES

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